





THE BLACKSMITH OF VOE

A Novel

BY

PAUL CUSHING

AUTHOR OF "CUT WITH HIS OWN DIAMOND" ETC.



NEW YORK


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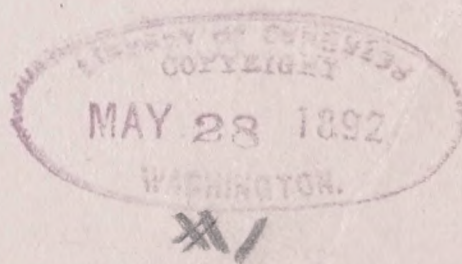
BY

R. A. Wood-Seys

PAUL CUSHING *pseud.*

AUTHOR OF "CUT WITH HIS OWN DIAMOND" ETC.

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THE BLACKSMITH OF VOE

PROLOGUE

It was a hot afternoon in the middle of May. A month earlier, ridges of snow were visible under the stone walls of the uplands of Peakshire.

It had been a long and bitter winter, and now the spring, instead of being the *avant-courrier* of summer, of melodious voice, and comely aspect of pink and white, was nothing but a lag-gard train-bearer in the ashen retinue of winter.

Then, all of a sudden, the mocking traitorous spirit that so wretchedly impersonated the sweet spirit of piping song and shooting bud, and sunshine dashed with shower, was vanquished and driven off in disgrace. Summer came for a few days, not laden with ripening fruits and crowned with shade-giving foliage, but still charged with the vital heat of life. He came just to let the pale-faced, thin-blooded race of mortals know that he was still alive, and in due time would come and hold his state among them.

But they who waited for his coming as watchers watch for the dawn were not at all prepared for this impromptu visit. They received him, not with the self-respecting homage of bared head and bended knee, as becomes the free and loyal subjects of a constitutional monarch, but prostrate, like Orientals. They lay down before him, panting and perspiring, overcome by his brilliant presence.

This state of affairs was illustrated on the afternoon in question by the attitude of Squire Saxton's head shepherd. Vigilant, skilled, and energetic, busy from morning till night, and anything but idle even when asleep in bed, Abel Boden now lay stretched out on the heather, with the upper part of his body in the shadow of an ancient yew-tree.

He was a man of about thirty years of age, a widower with one child, a lad named after himself, Abel. He lived with Dame Cowlshaw, the widow of Dick Cowlshaw, the squire's late wag-

oner, who was killed in the wood while hauling timber, two years earlier.

The dame took mightily to little Abel, and thought wonders of him.

"If he was my own child, he couldn't have had better intellects. He's only going of five, an' he knows the names of the trees, an' all the flowers in the plot, an' I'm most inclined to think he can tell which hive a bee comes from," she said with pride to the vicar one day, stroking the curly head of Master Abel, who was hiding his face in her dress.

Half an hour before the shepherd threw himself at full length on the heather, he had met the dame and his lad in search of forget-me-nots, and had carried the child across some fields to show him the young lambs. They came back across the moor, following the half-beaten wagon-track that led from Voe, down in the valley, to Potter's Carr, away up among the hills. Under the yew-tree that grew on the edge of the long-disused quarry on the moor, Abel sat and played with the boy for some minutes; then the dame trotted off with her charge, and Abel lay down, overcome with the heat.

Below him was the quarry—a deep wound half healed. Many a year had gone by since it was worked, as one could see at a glance: the smooth perpendicular rock was no longer of blood-red crimson as it caught the slanting light of the evening sun, but was of a dull brown, overlaid with great splashes of vivid green. Where the rock sloped or had been left rough, there mosses, grasses, flowers, weeds, bushes, trees—innumerable forms of life, wild, sweet, and tenacious—had gathered together, grown, multiplied, and transformed an eyesore into a paradise of untamed beauty. The hillside all about it was thickly wooded, and through the valley at its foot ran one of the maddest streams in all that land of mad streams.

Above the quarry the heather-land ran as far as Potter's Carr to the left, while the sloping land on the right rolled and twisted itself into rich pastures and golden corn-fields, with many and many a laughing dale that not infrequently put on a sudden look of savagery—startling to the stranger, but to the native nothing but a bit of its humor, a touch of pretty make-believe, like a child playing the bear.

Voe itself was nestled half in and half out of one such dale.

Abel lay on his back watching the almost motionless clouds that lay against the deep blue sky like great snow-mountains. Presently he heard footsteps approaching, and when they drew near, he raised himself on his elbow to see who it was: not twice a day did any one cross that part of the moor.

It was with some surprise that he recognized his brother Luke, who was returning home from Potter's Carr, with several empty sacks over his shoulder. Luke was his senior by two years, and was the right-hand man of Miller Duckmanton, who worked his own mill at Voe, and was considered by his neighbors to be a warm man.

For some months now there had existed a coldness between the two brothers, and they had parted several days ago on the edge of a quarrel. The bone of contention was Alice Duckmanton, the miller's only child, whose nineteenth birthday had occurred on the 1st of May. She was a delicate piece of innocent wantonness, who took to coquetry as a duck to water—as pretty as she was piquant and as tantalizing as she was variable.

Both the brothers loved her, but with a difference. Abel loved her because he could not help it, the silly fellow—being conquered by her brown eyes, her flashes of saucy humor interpolated between passages of gentle sympathy and maiden shyness. Luke loved her with a touch of animal fierceness, remembering always that she was the miller's only child, and, as such, the prospective owner of the mill and a few score acres of some of the best land in the parish.

And she, following the bend of pretty, witty deviltry native to her, gave her heart to the fierce man and her open and delusive favor to the mild. Her merry brain had an instinct for comedy, but was quite incapable of realizing the tragic abyss that fraternal feud and disappointed passion might create.

"Holloa, Luke! where art going?" cried Abel, in a friendly tone.

"Wum," answered Luke, surlily.

"I'll come along with you then. It's mighty hot o'erhead," said Abel, getting on to his feet.

"Maybe I'd rather have your absence than your company."

"Well, I'll be hanged if that isna straight! But you never was strong on manners, Luke," said Abel, with a laugh.

Luke elbowed his brother away from him, saying, with an oath, "My manners is good enough for the likes of you."

"All right, Luke; but keep yourself to yourself. I can stand your ill looks and words, being as how we're brothers; but——"

"But what, you soft-tongued rogue? Dost think I'll be balked by you? Let me hear of you speaking to her again, and I'll thrash you within an inch of your life," roared Luke.

Abel grew red in the face for a few moments; then the blood receded and his countenance blanched as shame at the insult

gave place to white-hot anger. The mild man was on his mettle now.

"Look here, Luke," he said, slowly, "this has gone so far it must go farther. I shall see her to-night, and I shall speak to her, you may be sure. If you're going to do any thrashing, you'd better do it now—if *you can*."

For a while the two men clutched and wrestled like two mad bears—with their eyes. Neither yielded. Then Luke dropped his bags and sprang at his brother. Abel went down plump. Luke had just time to deliver a fine, well-planted kick in the quarter thoughtfully provided by nature for that purpose, before Abel was up and on him.

It was not a fair stand-up fight, but a deadly and most irrational hug. Now, the hugging power of man is not great unless he is in a loving mood. Then he has been known to accomplish great things; but in anger he cannot hug as a fighting animal should, his ribs being stronger than his arms.

After they had squeezed each other ineffectually for some time, Abel broke loose and cried: "This isna the way to fight. Let's have it out with our fists like men."

For an answer, Luke flung himself on his brother, and the two went at the bear game again.

Presently Abel gasped: "For God's sake, drop it, Luke! We shall be down the quarry in a minute."

"The sooner the better," hissed Luke, with a terrible oath.

There was murder in his tone, and Abel knew it. It was nothing less now than a fight for life. They were close to the edge of the precipice, fifty feet from the bottom at the least. Abel shuddered, and tried hard to force his brother away; but Luke meant business, and held his ground tenaciously, while his eyes shone bright and fierce as a tiger's.

"Do you mean murder, Luke?"

"No, lad. We don't murder toads or snakes; we kill them," growled Luke, giving a sudden mighty heft that was intended to do the work.

The strain was too much for him; he slipped and fell on one knee, and lost half his hold. Quick as lightning, Abel put forth all his strength and threw his brother from him. Luke turned a complete somersault over the cliff, and went down with a fearful cry.

For a little while Abel stood like one in a trance, looking at his finger-nails; then he drew near to the edge and looked down. The steep declivity was studded with young trees and bushes, and their fresh green leaves prevented him from seeing far

down. He listened, but could hear no sound save that of the rushing stream below.

"Well, if I hadna done him he would have done me—that's all there is about it. I reckon I'd better go and give meself up to the police."

So saying, Abel Boden turned away and made toward the village of Voe. After proceeding some distance he stood still.

"Nay, I'll go back. Maybe he's not dead, and I can help him if he's badly hurt. May God forgive me the awful deed!" he said aloud.

He turned and ran back as hard as he could.

Arrived at the fatal spot, he stood and called several times: "Luke! Luke! where art? Where art, Luke?"

There was no answer. A great terror came over Abel, the terror of remorse and despair.

"Cast thyself down and die with him," a voice seemed to say: so clear and distinct was it that Abel involuntarily looked round to see the speaker.

There was no one to be seen. Still the voice spoke, and gave the same deadly counsel. Abel trembled.

"It's the Evil One himself. O God, have mercy on me!" he cried, falling back from the edge of the precipice and sinking on to his knees.

The voice, soft and dreamy and melodious, still sounded in his ears, and Abel thought that death itself would be as sweet as the voice that urged it. Would it? Would self-murder sweeten the bitter issue? "Cast thyself down and die with him." Like distant music lulling one to sleep sounded the fatal voice, and every syllable seemed as a strong cord pulling him toward the brink. He threw himself upon the ground, and clutched the heather wildly with both hands, for he had a sensation of being slowly drawn toward destruction. He lay there for some time, thus physically resisting the devil, and clinging to sanity by his finger-nails.

When the voice had been silent for many minutes, said Abel: "I will go and seek him now. God grant he is yet alive!"

He rose up and disappeared in the wood to the right of the quarry. . . .

Luke was not dead, nor, for the matter of that, much hurt. Had he been a saint, of course he would have been smashed to death. Had he been an ordinarily good fellow, of fair temper and moderate virtue, there is little doubt that he would have broken a few of his most serviceable bones. Being, however, a fierce, surly, graceless dog, whose freshest virtue was a bit rancid, whose death would have entailed no drain upon the

world's stock of sweet humanity, he must needs have guardian imps to bear him up lest he strike his pretty head against a rock.

Falling, he fell across the boughs of a young ash-tree; these with swift intelligence lowered their precious charge into the capacious arms of a spreading yew; while these again let him fall, a little unceremoniously, on to the churlish tops of a clump of thorn-bushes. From thence he reached the solid earth with a bump of an inferior kind, and rolling ten or a dozen feet, finally brought up with his body against a huge stone, that had been busy for half a century covering and padding itself with softest moss for the great occasion.

Only, his face was in a bunch of nettles and his hands were lovingly clinging to some straggling thorn-brambles. Brambles and nettles, mistaking the would-be murderer for a good man in adversity, gave forth freely of their peculiar virtue, and riddled him with a quiverful of dart-like pains.

Gathering his scattered wits together, Luke Boden got on to his feet and felt himself all over in a comical fashion. One would have thought he was making sure that he had brought all his members with him on his journey. His hands were bleeding, his face was burning, and his left foot was throbbing with fiery pain.

For his extraordinary deliverance he gave thanks in this wise: raising his eyes and fist apparently to heaven, he exclaimed, "Damn him! I'll be even with him yet!"

Whether he was thinking of his brother up there on the brow of the cliff, or of the imperfect protection Old Harry had rendered him, was not quite clear at the moment. Subsequent events, however, suggest that he was thinking of his brother, and not of his father.

Luke Boden was on a shelf of rock, some distance from the bottom, that ran along the face of the slope and was used by venturesome lads as a short cut between the woods on either side of the quarry. He moved cautiously along this path; which was perilously narrow at points, in the direction of the wood on the right: he knew that a little way in the wood was an easy path running from the moor above to the bridle-path in the valley below. The pain in his foot was intense, and he sat down to rest.

In a little while he heard his brother calling: "Luke! where art? Where art, Luke?"

He did not answer, looked savage, and swore hard. Presently an idea struck him.

"He'll be coming along here to look for me," he muttered, standing up and looking about him.

A little ahead, the path was not more than twenty inches wide; ten or a dozen feet above the path was a flat rock, forming a sort of table on which were bushes growing. With considerable difficulty, Luke climbed on to this rock and crouched behind the bushes. A tiger in ambush would not have been a deadlier enemy.

Peering through the bushes, Luke saw Abel leave the wood and come along the path; he lost sight of him for a few moments, as the path wound round the rocks. When Abel came into view again he was close at hand.

Softly on his hands and knees crawled Luke to the edge of the rock: immediately below him was the narrow shelf of rock which Abel had to cross. Luke lay on his chest and peered over. He drew back, and lifting a large, heavy stone, held it in both hands over the rock for a moment or two, and then he let it fall. It was beautifully timed. Abel Boden went down with a groan, rolling over and over like a ball, till his poor battered body lay motionless at the foot of the quarry.

With marvellous celerity, considering his condition, did Luke make his way down to his murdered brother. He picked him up on to his back as he would a sack of flour, and carried him out of the quarry and along the bridle-path; leaving this, he crossed the rushing stream by some stepping-stones, and ascended the wooded slope on the other side. Panting and sweating, he came to an old lead mine, where was a shaft full of water, rudely boarded over and partly covered with stones.

A few minutes of hard work and Abel Boden's tomb was ready for him: the body fell with a thud, and the water splashed up. A drop of it lighted on Luke's parted lips. Replacing the boards and the stones, Luke retraced his steps, recrossed the path along the face of the quarry, and, limping and sore bruised, came at last to the mill at Voe.

He entered the big old kitchen, sat down in the miller's arm-chair that stood in the chimney corner, and fell into a deep swoon. When he revived, he found himself lying on his own bed—he lodged with the miller—and the doctor bending over him. Now, Luke was mortally afraid of doctors, and, when well, contemptuous of their craft.

So now he sprang up in bed, crying: "Am I a-dying, doctor? Am I a-dying?"

The doctor laughed lightly, and gently pushing him back on to his pillow, said: "Oh, no, not yet awhile. You are shaken up a bit, and bruised here and there, and you have got a nasty foot, badly sprained; had to cut away your boot to get it off.

But you are a long way from being a dead man, or even a badly hurt man. Did you fall?"

"Yes; down the moor quarry."

"Indeed! how did that happen?"

"He pushed me over; wanted to kill me, I reckon."

At this, medicus pricked his ears.

"You were drunk, I suppose?"

"Not exactly: drink isna in my line."

"We've had a deal of rain lately; I suppose the land slipped and let you down?"

"Maybe it did; I reckon I can get up and ride over to Squire Saxton's, can't I?"

"To-morrow perhaps, but not to-day. What do you want with the squire?"

"Why, I want a warrant out for his arrest, to be sure. A fellow doesn't try to murder me for nothing, not if I know it!"

"Well, well, well; and it is really true, then? Who was it?"

"I'd rather not say just yet. I want the squire," answered Luke, doggedly.

"Very well; I will ride over and see him," said the doctor; and in a few minutes Luke heard the ring of his horse's hoofs on the cobble-paved yard below.

It was late in the evening when the squire arrived in his dog-cart, accompanied by a member of the county constabulary who lived in the next village.

"Why, Luke, my good fellow, what is this I hear? Attempted murder! Are you badly hurt?" said the squire, standing beside the bed.

He was a young man, much about the same age as Luke, with nothing in his build or bearing of the fine old squire—of fiction. Had he been a trifle smarter dressed, he would have passed for a weigher of sugars or a measurer of calicoes. Yet for two hundred years his forbears had been the squires of Voe, and had driven a roan mare, by which tenure they held their wide estate. His voice would have been sympathetic but for a slight stammer, which rendered it useless as a vehicle of sentiment.

"Yes, sir, I'm badly shook up; it's a wonder as how I wasn't killed, sir. It's all Abel's doing, sir!"

"Oh, come now! I cannot think that. Why, your brother Abel is one of the kindest and gentlest of men, as a good shepherd should be."

"Maybe he is, sir, with lambs and babies and such-like things. But he tried to kill me, and I want to have him arrested," said Luke, with a touch of fierceness in his tone.

"I'm very sorry to hear it, Luke. It's a serious thing, you know, to arrest a man on a charge like that. He is your brother, you know. Wasn't it an accident?" inquired the squire, who had a great liking for his head shepherd.

As a lad, Abel had won his admiration by his strange skill in landing trout and grayling with home-made rod and tackle, and his curious knowledge of birds and every kind of wood-lore.

"No, it was no accident; it was meant for downright murder. Some rough words passed atwixt us, then he fell on me and pushed me o'er the top of the moor quarry. He said he'd finish me," growled Luke.

"Well, I am sure Abel is sorry enough now for what he did."

"I reckon he is," quoth Luke, grimly.

"Then you will overlook it this time, won't you?"

Luke was silent.

"If I bring him to you, and he says he is sorry, you will, eh?"

"He won't come. He knows he meant murder."

"Won't he, though! It is getting late, but I will drive up to Dame Cowlshaw's and bring him back with me. This quarrelling between brothers will never do," said the squire, as he turned and left the room.

He did not see the odd smile that crossed Luke's face as he passed through the doorway.

Squire Saxton, despite his commonplace exterior and impeded speech, was a man who did much to justify his order in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. Everybody admitted he was a just man; and a considerable minority—every man of them a tenant of his—were bold enough to advance the proposition that he was also a generous man. The influence of the Hall was felt in every cottage within a radius of miles, and everywhere it was recognized as an agent of good-will, brotherly kindness, and the essential refinement of courteous manners and gentle speech.

Squire Saxton was not one of the modern breed who care not a brass farthing whether their people be courteous or boorish, clean or dirty, ignorant or instructed, so long as they drop courtesy and pull forelock to themselves and vote straight at election times. But then he was suckled and nurtured in the old traditions of squiralty. So now, characteristically and naturally, he busied himself with trying to heal the angry breach between the shepherd and the miller.

In the course of an hour the squire returned without Abel. His face wore an anxious look.

"I told you he wouldn't come, sir," said Luke.

"I am sorry to say he has not come home. I don't under-

stand it; I think he must be attending to the sheep," answered the squire, unwilling to believe that Abel had fled the country.

"Nay, sir, he's none tending sheep. I want to have him taken up, sir."

"Perhaps it will be the best way of getting him back again, if he is foolish enough to have gone away. Let me have your story in full."

Thereupon Luke furnished an account of what had happened. It was colored, not over-brilliantly, but artistically. It might have been a picture of the first Abel, done by Cain the Crafty, son of Adam, after a certain encounter in the fields. It put Abel in an ugly light, and troubled the squire greatly. If Abel was really guilty, it was better for him to get away out of the country, thought the squire; he gave him his best wishes in the endeavor, and if he had known his whereabouts he would have sent him his purse as a token. All this was in his capacity of squire. As a justice of the peace, it was his duty to uphold the law and punish offenders; and he did his official duty.

Luke's statement was reduced to writing and read to him; the oath was administered, and then the squire made out a warrant for Abel's arrest. It was close on midnight when the squire left the mill.

Next morning, peaceful wood-embowered Voe was awake early and terribly excited. Had it been the other way about, and Luke had tried to do the killing, not a dozen people in the place would have been surprised. But that the mild, gentle-natured, humor-loving Abel Boden should have tried to slay his brother, and have fled to avoid arrest, was something to fetch folk out of their beds at daybreak, and make them swarm heads like "flies in vintage-time." The witcraft of Voe would not have been more exercised had a volcano opened on the top of the Shimmering cliff behind the mill.

Popular sympathy was with Abel, and certain of the Voese went so far as to throw doubt upon Luke's statement. The doubters were mostly young men of not more than fifty-five years to sixty, who knew no better. But the Witan of three-score years and ten and upward shook their sagacious nod-dles; quoted the squire, the doctor, and the policeman; inquired triumphantly if the warrant was not out; and meekly suggested that well-behaved boys did not offer opinions to their seniors before they were asked, nor talk of what they knew nothing about.

The day passed and the night fell, but nothing was heard of Abel Boden. On the morrow it was bravely announced by Dame Rumor that three constables, two of the squire's game-

keepers, and a detachment of villagers were to search the quarry and the surrounding woods.

The news travelled in that semi-miraculous manner peculiar to out-of-the-way places, with a nimbleness almost uncanny. People seemed to spring out of the earth, and come forth from the dark places among the rocks, and swarm around the mill to witness the departure of the band of searchers. Such a crowd had not been seen in Voe for many a day.

The searchers, some twenty in number, were standing near the kitchen door; the crowd held the yard, the steps, the gates, and half a dozen wagons and carts; inside, the squire was having a talk with Luke, when a man left the crowd of on-lookers, and pushing past the group of searchers, entered the kitchen and asked to see the squire. He was a tall, muscular man, of about sixty, with iron-gray hair, and dressed in dark purple corduroy. Everybody knew Nathan Wass, the broom-maker, who lived all alone in a dark, weird-looking little cottage, built of tufa-stone, on the edge of the wood under the moor.

In a few minutes it was known that he was closeted with the squire, and the excitement grew intense; for Nathan Wass was a quiet, unobtrusive man, reserved as an oyster, who never meddled with business not his own. At the same time he had the reputation of enjoying something of the luck of the famous Jack Horner; and into what pie he put his thumb, from the same he was pretty certain to extract the plum. It was characteristic of Nathan Wass that, if he appeared at all, he always appeared at the right time, and either said or did something that every one would but no one could.

The crowd waited, wondering what nail Nathan was hitting on the head. By and by he came out, and moved away with the band of searchers, headed for some distance by the squire himself. The crowd hung back, not daring to follow.

Then everybody learned in no time that Nathan Wass had been a witness of the encounter between the two brothers; he had seen Luke slip and Abel throw him over the brink. Then Nathan had turned and fled the scene in horror. The crowd murmured, not at Abel, but at Nathan. Why should he forge a prison bolt against Abel the Gentle? Why did not he hold his peace, if that was all he could say? He and Abel had been very friendly together, would take long jaunts in company, and play draughts during the long winter evenings. Confound it! it was not like Nathan Wass to go and do a shabby thing like that.

The searchers were not successful, and no trace of Abel

could be found. In the course of a week, information was sent to every police station in Great Britain, and the ports were closely watched; several men were arrested, only to be discharged on examination. One man was remarkably like Abel; but he was not Abel, only Harry. Weeks, months, years went by without yielding any word, or sign, or token of the missing man.

The dead cannot remember, and the living are often as the dead. Abel Boden was forgotten of the living.

CHAPTER I

A DARK HORSE

"GENTLEMEN, it is time to begin business. Gentlemen, I solicit your attention, and would ask for silence."

Rat, tat, tat went the auctioneer's hammer on the back of the stout arm-chair upon which he was standing.

The hum of voices ceased, and the auctioneer continued: "I am here to-day, gentlemen, to sell a very valuable piece of property. It will be sold in one lot."

Murmurs from different parts of the room.

"Such are my instructions, gentlemen. The land must go with the house and the shop. There is no reserve price. It will become the property of the highest bidder. The house and smithy alone are worth four hundred pounds of any man's money."

Ironical laughter from the crowd.

"Gentlemen laugh! I don't wonder. I meant five hundred pounds, not four."

Louder ironical laughter.

"Oh, I dare say you think, gentlemen, that two hundred would have been nearer the mark?"

"Hear! hear!" in a chorus.

"Yes, to be sure; exactly so. But I'm not so green, gentlemen, as I evidently look. My instructions are to sell, not to give away. John Marsden is an auctioneer, not a relieving officer. But the matter is in your own hands, gentlemen; the place isn't worth a farthing more than you will give for it. But this I will say: gentlemen, for a widower, or a bachelor, or a man with economical ideas regarding the size of his family, there isn't a prettier, snugger, neater cottage within a dozen miles of Voe. And then the business that goes with it! Didn't our poor dead friend, known to most of us here from our cradle up as honest Jack Wragg, drive as fine a smithy as you'll find in Peakshire? He made money enough at it. And, gentlemen, remember that honest Jack Wragg left behind him a poor, sorrowing widow, with no child to work for her and comfort her in her old age. All her fortune is in this small

estate; and with the image of poor Jack Wragg's sorrowing widow before your eyes, who will be stony-hearted enough to say that the place is not dirt cheap at five hundred pounds?"

A dead silence followed this appeal, and the auctioneer smiled a benediction on the group of upturned faces.

"Gentlemen, I knew it would be so," he said solemnly.

He paused a moment or two, then he continued in secular style: "In addition to house, smithy, and the adjoining garden, there are two acres one rood and seventeen poles of land. It consists of two small meadows beside the river Scarthin, and separates the squire's land from Miller Boden's, who, I am glad to see, is present. Gentlemen, you know the land as well as I do: better grass-land is not to be found in the whole valley of the Scarthin; it is worth a hundred pounds an acre. Gentlemen, what offer do you make for the house, smithy, garden, and meadow-land? Any offer, gentlemen! Start it at anything you please."

"Fifty pounds," sang out a gentleman in a smock-frock, who was well known to everybody, and was not worth fifty shillings in the world.

Loud guffaws greeted this outburst of spirit.

"Fifty pounds; thank you, sir. Fifty pounds only is offered for—sixty, eighty, a hundred, a hundred and—fifty; thank you, Mr. Boden. Is there any advance on a hundred and—sixty, seventy, eighty, two hundred; thank you, Mr. Sims. If the squire gets it for the money, he—two hundred and ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty—fifty. Two hundred and fifty pounds only is offered for the—sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety; thank you, Mr. Sims. Two hun—three hundred it is, and thank you, Mr. Boden. Going for three hundred pounds; is there any advance on three hundred pounds? Gentlemen, I must tell you a story—a true story," said the auctioneer, thrusting his hands in his trousers pockets, and putting on the well-known comical expression that always heralded one of his famous stock of true stories.

The common room at the Nag's Head Inn, where the sale was taking place, was crowded with dwellers in and about Voe. The event had been looked forward to with unusual interest for some weeks, during which time it had formed the staple of conversation in the village, and had been discussed from every point of view accessible to local knowledge.

Indeed, the discussion had generated no little heat, and had led to the making of a good number of small bets. The smallness of the bets, moreover, in no way diminished the interest in the result. The area of speculation was very limited, the only

question being whether Squire Saxton or Miller Boden would be the purchaser. It was conceded on all hands that the contest would lie between these two; the very idea of any foreign competition was excluded.

That there should be a sale at all was a matter to be regretted; for the Wraggs had been the smiths of Voe time out of mind. Honest Jack liked a glass of beer as well as any man in the dale, and now and then, at long intervals, would get a little market pert. At such times Jack Wragg grew mighty proud of his forbears, and cracked of his ancestry as bravely as a lord.

"My fathers have stood on this hearthstone for over three hundred years. Squire Saxton is a gentleman and I bain't; but I'm better than a hundred years older than he is," he had been known to say, more than once, in his lively moments.

But the line had at last run out, and the smith of Voe would no longer bear the almost official and historic name of Wragg. This was evil enough, forsooth, in the eyes of the natives, and was inevitable. But if the Wragg place was to be sold, of course the miller or the squire would buy it. And it was equally a matter of course that the squire's purse was a foot to the miller's inch in depth; but it was not equally certain which of the two was prepared to dip the deeper into his purse.

Naturally the squire would like to get hold of that two acres one rood and seventeen poles of land along the riverside; everybody knew that it was a kind of Naboth's vineyard, for which a long line of squires had lusted. But it was the kingdom, power, and glory of the Wraggs, and they had clung to it with a pride in which there was something royal.

As for the miller, the natives were all sure that he wanted the land, and would run a tight race with the squire to get it; but there was less unanimity of opinion as to the real reason why he wanted it. Among the reasons admitted to be probable, and discussed as such, were the following:

No. I. The miller owned just ninety-seven acres two roods and twenty-three poles of land already; and if you added to this, two acres one rood and seventeen poles more, the result would be exactly one hundred acres. Any one could understand that the miller would like to get the round number of acres, especially as the Wragg land lay next to his own, and was second to none in the parish. The authority for the exact number of acres, roods, and poles owned by the miller was not shown or inquired for: in Voe, folk are not of the breed of breath-wasters, who are all for argument and proof, and will

not believe a brick wall is made of bricks till they have run their heads against it.

No. II. The miller did not get on very well with the squire, and wanted the land to spite him.

No. III. The miller got on very well with the squire; but there was no doubt he was at heart a Radical, though he professed—no, he did not profess—he was always, like a wise man, dumb on politics

No. IV. The miller was a stanch Conservative, and wanted to strengthen his influence in that direction. Soil is weighty in good honest Tory scales, and many a mickle makes a muckle.

No. V. The miller had a sour, gloomy devil in him, and though he did not care a brass farthing for the land really, it was his satanic whim to oppose whoever did.

No. VI. The miller hated young Abel Boden, Jack Wragg's assistant. It was twenty years ago that the quarrel took place; and his brother Abel had gone off to foreign parts to avoid arrest, and was probably dead now. The miller could not bear the sight of his brother's lad, and had been heard to say he wished him a hundred miles off. It was not the land he wanted, but the smithy. If he once had that, his nephew Abel would never shoe another horse in Voe.

The general hope was that the squire would get the place; but when it came to the betting, the odds were in favor of the miller. He was known as one who was bad to beat, tenacious in purpose, obstinate in will, dogged in determination. Still, everything depended upon the squire's instructions to his agent, Mr. Sims; and the prospect of a close contest had produced a state of feeling in Voe that bordered upon excitement.

The auctioneer told his story; it was a good one, altogether too good to be true, but it was too long to be reproduced here. A burst of long and loud laughter, such as many an actor would give a month's salary to provoke, attested its success; then to business again.

The bidding was fairly brisk, though it advanced chiefly in spurts that rose and fell as if obedient to a mechanical law. For some time, several outsiders contributed to keep the ball rolling, much to the disgust of the natives, who were eager for the great home contest to begin.

One by one the foreigners were silenced and driven off the field; the competition grew narrower and narrower, until at last it lay between Miller Boden for himself and Mr. Sims for the squire. The battle had begun. The auctioneer forgot to joke, the on-lookers to cough; not a whisper was heard, not a foot was shuffled. All lips were parted and many mouths were

open; had the necessary muscles been at hand, every ear would have been pricked.

The figures had mounted up high. Five hundred pounds was the last bid, and Miller Boden had made it. The market value of the lot was already exceeded by a clear fifty pounds, and whoever got it now would pay a fancy price for it. The miller stood with one foot on a chair, in front of the auctioneer, with a stern, sullen look on his face. To his left, near the window, was Mr. Sims, smiling a little nervously just now, for he felt that all eyes were upon him.

"Any advance on five hundred pounds? Going at—five hundred and ten pounds."

A low murmur of applause.

"Five hundred and ten pounds. Mr. Boden, you will not lose it for ten pounds? Shall I say twenty, twenty? Twenty it is, and thank you. Five hundred and twenty pounds; going at——"

"Thirty."

Another murmur of applause, at which the miller frowned heavily.

"Thank you, Mr. Sims. Five hundred and thirty pounds; any advance on—come, Mr. Boden, it would be a pity to lose it for a paltry ten pounds. Shall I make it forty? just another ten? Going—forty, and I thank you. Five hundred and forty pounds only" (a laugh) "is offered; going at five hundred and—you have not done yet, Mr. Sims, I am sure; another ten? You will be sorry when it is over—is it fifty? Going, going——"

"Fifty," said Mr. Sims, and his mouth closed with a snap.

A deep murmur of approval filled the room, and threatened to break out in a ringing cheer.

"Gentlemen, I am offered five hundred and fifty pounds. Going at five hundred and fifty pounds; once——"

"Sixty," growled the miller, and again that deep murmur filled the room; for his pluck was admirable.

He looked surprised and pleased, and sank his hands deep into his pockets. But the squire's representative thrust his thumbs into the arm-holes of his waistcoat and shook his head significantly. He had done. The squire was beaten and the fight was over, thought the crowd, and something like a great pent-up sigh of disappointment broke forth; those near the door began to move out to spread the news.

"Five hundred and sixty pounds is offered. Going, going, go——"

"SEVENTY!" cried a voice a little in the rear of the auction-

eer; and if a bomb had suddenly exploded in their midst, it would hardly have caused a greater sensation.

The hammer fell from the auctioneer's hand and rattled on to the floor, where it lay unnoticed; while the auctioneer himself turned round in his chair to get a look at the new bidder. The miller stood up and glared at him furiously. Those that had moved out came trooping back, and stood on tiptoe by the door, trying hard to get a glimpse of the stranger.

On every face was depicted wonder, and every man asked his neighbor the same question, "Who is he?" and each gave the same answer, "Blest if I know."

He was a man who looked a hale sixty, of medium height, dressed in a cutaway suit of dark blue serge, with a billycock hat thrown back well off his forehead, thus affording a good view of his face. His close-cropped hair was pretty well frosted, but his short thick beard and mustache were almost the color of a chestnut. His eyes were gray and of kindly aspect; his nose was doubtless originally a good specimen of the Roman type, but by some catastrophe it had apparently been broken and turned askew; under his left eye was a deep scar, extending across the greater part of his cheek. He was magnificently bronzed, and mellowed as is no human fruit under the sky of Old England.

Another foreign trick—he held a wooden toothpick between his teeth, and amused himself by gnawing the end.

What with oblique nose and scarred cheek, there was a certain grimness in his appearance; but his eyes, genial and humorous, gave away his savagery entirely, and blabbed of the sweet milk of human kindness.

Character always peeps out through the eyes. Every other organ of the body will, upon occasions, lie. The facial muscles will make lying their regular occupation, and carve upon the face most eloquent fictions. But the eye mirrors only reality; therein, if anywhere, is visible the true nature unmasked and naked. Therein one may catch a glimpse of that coy mystery, the soul. The stranger's eyes were his salvation.

At this moment, perhaps the most remarkable thing about him was his exquisite self-possession. He knew the sensation he had made; he knew that all eyes were upon him; he could not fail to hear the buzz of inquiry and astonishment that filled the room. But it seemed only to amuse him. He was, indeed, conscious of a momentary tingle; but the tingle was pleasant.

Right hand in trousers pocket, left playing with his beard, toothpick between his teeth, a good-natured smile flitting over

his face, he stood easily, and met in turn one-half the eyes that made of him a cynosure.

One of the very best forms of introduction is a good, honest look in the eye. Among simple, primitive people, it precedes and almost supersedes speech. And those of the company who met the glance of the stranger felt very much as though they had shaken him by the hand. Also, these were they that formed, on the spur of the moment, a new party, and gave the stranger their sympathy, and straightway backed him in the coming contest with the miller. On the other hand, the miller had his backers; good, honest folk enough they were, whose motto was, Voe for the Voese, and who entertained a proper contempt of foreigners.

Presently the auctioneer got down, and securing his hammer, remounted his chair and continued: "Gentlemen, while there is life there is hope. Faint heart never won fair lady. Only the brave deserve the fair. *Nil desperandum*. Hang on like a bull-dog, etc., etc. Gentlemen, time is going, and our friends here are both eager to get at each other's throat—I speak in a parable. Five hundred and seventy pounds is offered—gentlemen, if you have set your hearts upon it, it will be cheap at a thousand. Any advance on——"

"Eighty," growled the miller stubbornly.

But the stranger evidently meant business, and without any loss of time called out, "Ninety!"

This seemed to sting the miller; he began to wake up and look sharp; and for some time, amid breathless silence, with no interruption save the verbal repetition of the bid on the part of the auctioneer, the fight went on so:

Miller. "Six hundred."

Auctioneer. "Six hundred."

Stranger. "And ten."

Miller. "Twenty."

Stranger. "Thirty."

Miller. "Forty."

Stranger. "Fifty."

Miller. "Sixty."

Stranger. "Seventy."

Miller. "Eighty."

Stranger. "Ninety."

Miller (with a fierce grunt). "Seven hundred."

For a moment or two, the auctioneer raised himself from his bent-forward position, in which he acknowledged the bids, and eased his back. The crowd did very much the same thing; throats were cleared, noses blown, feet shuffled; then silence fell again.

"Gentlemen, another start, and success to the bravest! Seven hundred pounds is offered. Any advance?"

Stranger. "And ten."

Miller. "Twenty."

Stranger. "Thirty."

Miller. "Forty."

Stranger. "Fifty."

A long, a fearfully long pause seemed to follow. Perfect silence reigned; but if glances had been audible, there had been a tumult. The miller, with his foot on the chair, with bended head and downward eyes, did not *look* beaten; and yet his ominous silence!

"Any advance on seven hundred and fifty pounds? Once—twice——"

"FIVE," said the miller, with an upward jerk of his head.

A thrill went through the crowd. The miller had come down to a fiver. He was bending. He was breaking. There was a general catching of the breath in surprise; it sounded like the gasp of a Thor.

"Seven hundred and fifty-five. Any——"

"Sixty-five," cried the stranger, working the toothpick with his teeth from side to side of his mouth, in a manner that said, as plainly as if spoken in Voe dialect: "Marry come up! none of your fivers for me. We'll fight it out in fifties if you like!"

There was another pause before the miller answered the challenge.

"Eighty," he growled, and a many-folded "Ah!" was breathed by the crowd.

All eyes turned to the stranger. Slowly he drew from his waistcoat pocket another toothpick, and put it between his teeth; it was a clean, pointed, wiry, unchewed toothpick, and seemed good for another five hundred pounds.

It made several quick passages from one corner of the mouth to the other; then it halted for an instant on the larboard quarter, while its owner called out, "Eight hundred!"

Plump down on his chair went the miller—beaten.

"At eight hundred pounds, going, GOING—GONE! What name, sir?"

"Christopher Kneebone," answered the stranger, pulling out of his hip pocket a large roll of bank-notes.

CHAPTER II

BELOW THE BELT

OUTSIDE the Nag's Head it was a white February afternoon, cold and cheerless. The sky looked surly, and the air was full of snowflakes, not dry and crisp, but wet and heavy like half-drowned butterflies. I suppose every flake remained true to its scientific character, and assumed the shape of a six-rayed star—every ray the axis of a little world of exquisite beauty. But to ordinary eyes whose lids were roofs and whose lashes were spouts running with melted snow, there was nothing visible of this cunning architecture. The beautiful stellar shapes were nothing but vicious white dabs of water, of great sticking power, which suddenly melted into rivers, lakes, and waterfalls, seas, bays, and gulfs, and other interesting bodies of water, all over one's personal landscape. So the crowd, not caring to face the weather in a hurry, now that the sale was over, dispersed itself quickly into the various rooms of the inn, and for some hours discussed the situation, and rehearsed in detail the moving drama of the auction. East and west along the valley, north and south over the hills and the moors, the tale travelled swiftly and in perfect form. A little golden-breasted romance on wings, it flew hither and thither, and sang its song, and passed like a quick gleam of color, until the whole country-side was talking of the battle at the Nag's Head.

It was the evening of the day of the sale. In a little cosey sitting-room in a quiet part of the inn, in front of a merrily burning fire, sat Christopher Kneebone. The tea things had not been long removed, the white cloth had given place to a red one, and in the centre of the table stood a glass lamp of yellow tinge. The chair occupied by the man was an arm-chair covered with horsehair, and very low; the springs were feeble, and there was a deep sag in the seat, which, however, added to the comfort of sitting in it. When new, the seat had resembled a tolerably stiff ball, on which it would have been an acrobatic feat to sit without the aid of the supporting arms. The man's legs were crossed, which brought his top knee on a line with his chin. He was smoking a long-stemmed pipe of

cherry-wood, and reading at intervals the morning *Standard*. Like a potent and jealous spirit, the paper appealed to him with its own peculiar charm, and would not let him rest. Yet the magician was unable to hold his attention for more than a few minutes at a stretch; then the paper would fall upon his knee, and he would puff slowly, with his eyes upon the ruddy fire. Now and then from afar came the sound of a loud voice or a ringing laugh, mellowed by distance and muffled by the heavy red curtains that hung before the door. It was snowing still outside; and looking at the window, which overlooked an orchard, one could see the snow driving against the panes, and already piled high up on the sill. The man, catching sight of the heaped-up snow against the window, got up, and putting his face close to the panes, while he cut off the light with his hands, peered out into the night. White orchard; white boughs and black trunks; black wall with white coping; a well windlass and bucket quite white, and three feet of hanging chain quite black; beyond the orchard the Scarthin, a broad black band; a white slope, and then the high hills, steep, covered with firs with white arms and black poles. A wild, sad, dismal, eerie world to look upon. The man shivered with imagination, and came back, and sat enjoying the company of the man-loving and man-beloved spirit of the flame. Presently the landlord came into the room and said:

"Mr. Boden, the miller, sir, is outside, and would like to see you for a few minutes, if it's agreeable to you."

"Oh, yes; show him in," answered Kneebone, and the landlord retired. In a little while there was a knock at the door, and Kneebone called out, "Come in." The door opened, and in walked the miller.

Let us take a good look at him as he stands there, in front of the red curtains, the yellow light of the lamp falling full upon him. It is twenty years last May since we saw him on the edge of the quarry on the moor. There are so many unknown murderers walking the earth that the chances are that we have seen more than one in our time; have probably sat at the same table with one; ridden in a railway carriage together, and through the darkness of a long tunnel. What a sweet sensation we should have had, if we had only known! In the miller's case, we happen to know a thing or two, and so our eyes are wondrous seeing; but if we had not known, it is a question that we should have detected any trace of the murderer in Miller Boden. He has grown stout, and his hairless face is large and red; his brown eyes are very restless. Still, he looks one in the face frankly enough, and his voice is not unpleasant,

though a trifle gruff. His manner, like that of most of us, depends upon his temper, and his temper is variable. There is something akin to fate in physical organization, and certain types of moral character are strangely allied with certain lines of bodily structure. As the difference between a saint and a sinner may be identical with the quality of the liver, so the mental and moral fibre of a man is determined by certain lines and curves of physical growth. People are easily classified. A few well-known types include most of them. Seeing the individual, we recognize the type; knowing the type, we know fairly well what to expect of the individual, and we are seldom disappointed—for the individual is rarely able to transcend the rigorous limitations of his type. On his face, and, for the matter of that, on every square inch of his body, nature had published the fact that the miller's temper was short, fiery, irascible. In a subtler way, she had also notified the fact that a certain element of sullenness and gloom had modified the original quality of his temper. But people pay very little attention to these subtle and vital modifications, of which Nature, however, is so very full and fond. Yet cunning as Nature is in publishing our secrets, there are some that slip through her fingers in a curious fashion. Who would have thought, for instance, that that florid, well-fed man found night a dreadful horror to him? That for twenty years he had awoke nightly with a start, and oftentimes a cry, with the groan of a dying man in his ears? That for twenty years the sensation of a drop of water that had fallen on his under lip had remained with him day and night, burning him like an acid? These were secrets of which Nature gave no sign, or gave it only in hieroglyphics which no one could read. It is just like the eccentric dame. Let a man from Asia, Africa, or America pass our way, and if he be vain, Nature will write upon him this notice, in universal characters, Behold a peacock! Our next-door neighbor shall be a forger, a burglar, or a murderer, however, and Nature will keep as voiceless as a giraffe. A comparatively blameless creature sets a whole continent curling its lip, while a monster may pass to and fro like an angel unawares. Not that we would have it understood that the miller was a monster. Gladly would he have given all he possessed to be able to fish up his brother's dead body from the old shaft and revivify it.

He was a widower now—his wife, the pretty, piquant Alice Duckmanton, having been dead a dozen years or so. She had left him with one child, a girl named Ruth, rising eighteen. But for Ruth, years ago the miller would have given himself

up to justice, and have suffered what penalty the law might have inflicted. He had not been happy with his wife, perhaps because he felt that he had paid too heavy a price for her; but Ruth was his idol. He loved her, not tenderly and softly, but passionately and fiercely, as a tiger its cub. To an on-looker there was little or nothing that was humanizing in the miller's love for his daughter. But, then, the on-looker could see only what was to be seen, and in every great love there is much that is not open to the eye, and there are powers of unguessed good.

Christopher Kneebone had risen as the miller came into the room.

"Good-evening, Mr. Boden. Be good enough to take a seat," he said, pointing to the leather-covered sofa, broad-bottomed and springless, that stood against the wall to the miller's left hand.

"Thank you. I hope I'm not intruding, sir? I wanted to have a bit of talk with you about the sale," said the miller, settling himself at the head of the sofa, near the fire.

Kneebone pushed the circular table some distance back, and moved his chair to the other side of the hearth, opposite the miller.

"Do you smoke?" he inquired, as he refilled his pipe.

"Well, I don't mind if I do have a pipe, seeing as how you are smoking. I'm not much of a hand at it, though."

"That's right. What will you have to drink?"

"Hot gin's my drink."

Kneebone rang the bell, and ordered a "church-warden" and a couple of gins; he furnished his own tobacco. Pipes were lighted, glasses touched, healths drunk; then, having duly mounted this social platform of fraternity, conversation was in order.

"Pretty lively time this afternoon," said the miller, puffing in that short, quick, unsatisfactory manner peculiar to the occasional smoker.

"Yes; the company seemed very interested," responded Kneebone, following the remark with a long series of beautiful smoke rings that curved and twisted themselves in every possible shape, as they floated slowly upward without breaking themselves.

"It's been in the Wragg family, you see, so long. I beat the squire, at all events; I'm glad of that."

"Was that the squire's agent, then, that you were bidding against?"

"Why, yes; didn't you know it? That's where the fun came in. Some folks backed the squire, and some backed me.

There's been a lot of money won and lost on the result. Your coming in, though, spoiled the game; no offence, sir, I hope?"

"Not a bit. Sorry I spoiled the game; but I wanted just such a place, and, anyway, you made me pay for it."

The miller gave a loud laugh.

"It 'ud never have done to let a stranger, and, if I might so say, a foreigner, come in and walk off with the place for nothing. But bull-dogs understand each other, sir, and when I had tried your mettle, why, dang it, it warn't the money I knocked in to—it was your pluck, Mr. Kneebone. I knew we could settle the bargain after."

Just then Kneebone picked up his glass, and the miller did likewise; and as a token of extra good-will and amity, he jingled glasses again.

"Very good of you, my friend; but I wish you had given in to my pluck at seven hundred, instead of eight. It's a pile of good money thrown away, and I've none too much of the precious dirt."

"It's nigh on double its worth, I know; but that's my lookout, not yours. What do you say to a thousand down for it? I know of a place a few miles from here, just as pretty, that can be bought for less than one-half of what I offer you."

Christopher Kneebone sat looking at the toe of the boot he was nursing on his knee, for some time in silence. At last he said, "You seem to want the place badly, miller?"

"Well, I don't mind saying I do. You see, the bit of land adjoins mine by the river."

"I see. I don't know but what we might come to terms about the land. I should like to oblige you if I could."

The miller coughed, and moved about on his seat, before he said: "It's very neighborly of you, Mr. Kneebone—very neighborly indeed; but—well, I want the smithy as much if not more than I want the land."

Kneebone shook his head as he answered: "Sorry I can't oblige you, Mr. Boden; but I cannot. If the land's any good, I'll try and let you have that. But I've set my heart on the smithy."

The miller's face grew redder. "Why, you are no smith, are you?" he cried, almost savagely. Kneebone gave a slight start and, looking keenly at his companion, asked, "What do you mean?"

"I only thought as how you don't look much like a smith. You should have seen Jack Wragg's hands," replied the miller, with a laugh.

Mechanically, Kneebone opened his hands and examined

them on both sides. The backs were bronzed and somewhat hairy, but the palms and the inside of the fingers were white and soft-looking. There were no callosities at the roots of the fingers, no grime inwrought into the lines of the hands. In no sense were they the horny hands of toil. Having finished his examination, Kneebone looked at the miller, and with an odd expression of countenance remarked:

"I don't know but what you are right. They do look in rather prime condition, I confess; but a twelvemonth's idleness and plenty of soap and water will do wonders. I guess I can soon toughen them up again, though."

"Then you want the place for yourself, it seems?" said the miller, beginning to think that perhaps he had been a little too familiar with the future blacksmith of Voe. He had stepped into the shoes of Miller Duckmanton, and to the inherited ten talents had added other ten talents, and was now justly esteemed a man of some substance. And it was not for any smith of Voe—though he was fool enough to pay a fancy price for his forge—to put himself on a level with Miller Boden. But in this crude world, compromise is the order of the day all round; and as the miller had an object to gain, he tactically refrained from any quick assertion of his superior position.

Answered Kneebone: "Why, certainly. I'm not so strong as I used to be, and shall want a good hand to help me; but I'm not here to play the gentleman. They tell me that Jack Wragg's man is a pretty good hand. Do you know anything of him?"

"Yes, I do; and to tell you the truth, between ourselves, it is on his account mainly that I am anxious about the smithy," said the miller, moving uneasily in his seat.

"Indeed! I didn't know that. He's some relation of yours, isn't he? Same name?"

"Yes; he's my nephew. But I'm not over-proud of him. His father had to fly the country twenty years ago; we had a quarrel, and he pitched me down a nasty cliff on the moor. It was a wonder I wasn't killed outright," said the miller, in a hoarse voice.

"Has he never been heard of since?" inquired Kneebone, shading his face from the light with his hand.

"No. I judge he's dead by this time."

"And what about his lad?"

"Oh, we don't get on together. I never took to him, and I should be glad to see him leave the place for good."

"I understand. Does he drink?"

"No; but he is a queer fellow: roams about at all hours of

the night; pretends to be after insects and all kinds of vermin; but I shouldn't be surprised if he got nabbed for poaching some day, and serve him right, too!"

"What sort of a workman is he?"

"Oh, nothing to brag of. I could put you in the way of getting as good a workman as him, any day. I shouldn't care for it to be known that I had a hand in it; but if you could see your way to oblige me in the matter, I reckon we could square things in the way of trade."

"If I don't employ him, then, you think he would have to leave the place, eh?"

"That's just it. He is good for nothing but smithery. He couldn't live and grow fat on insects."

"No; they are not feeding. Well, I'm glad, very glad, Mr. Boden, to have had this talk with you, and I hope we shall be good neighbors. I'll think it over about young Boden: there's no cause for hurry in the matter," answered Kneebone. And a little later the miller, with a feeling of elation, took his leave.

CHAPTER III

INVOKING JUPITER

THE next morning, after an early breakfast, Christopher Kneebone—over whose identity, courteous and sapient reader, we can afford to let the thin veil still fall—was driven in the landlord's trap to the nearest railway station, a distance of four and a half miles, where he booked through to London. It was a tough journey through the heavy snowdrifts, and more than once Kneebone and the driver had to get out, and with spades with which they had luckily provided themselves, cut a passage for the horse and trap. It was understood that Kneebone would return in the course of a week or so, when he would begin putting the Wragg place in trim. In the interval, Voe discussed the new-comer pretty thoroughly. It was evident that he had both money and pluck—two things that Voe had a great liking for. The poor are the last to respect poverty, and the timid timidity. The bulk of the Voese were poor and timid, and had Kneebone seemed to be in the same boat with themselves, he would soon have learnt to his cost what it was to intrude himself into a community where he was not wanted. As it was, he was discussed with the respect that is born of fear, and with the discretion that is said to be the better part of valor. The man who could beat the miller, who had beaten the squire, was evidently a man that could hold his own and give change for sixpence, blacksmith or no blacksmith. On this latter point there was for some days a considerable difference of opinion. That Christopher Kneebone was a common, every-day blacksmith was scouted by most as an absurdity. What he had been years ago, it was not for them to say; but anybody with half an eye could see that he had not played a tattoo on the anvil for many a year. He had bought the place because he had got the money and the pluck; maybe he had got somebody ready to put into it—maybe he would rent it.

Of old, every tribe had its bard, every clan its minstrel; and there are but few communities, however small and secluded, that have not in their midst a native-born romancist. Voe was no exception to this rule, and now was a fine opportunity for

the man with the thin bright streak of imagination. The opportunity was seized, and Voe suddenly found itself, on the third day, tingling with excitement at the report that Christopher Kneebone was simply an agent of Squire Saxton, who had taken this means of circumventing the miller! The idea was juicy and full of meat, and found favor with many palates. It had been sucked pretty dry and clean, and was ready to be thrown aside like an empty orange-skin, when it was solemnly announced by Am Ende to be "all rot," on the saying of the miller himself, who knew what he was talking about.

Am was the handy man, the Jack-of-all-trades, and typical ne'er-do-well of the village. Seldom quite drunk and never quite sober, his principles were an unknown quantity, and his practices were morally piebald. He swore like a trooper, and was credited with being good-natured. No one dreamt of calling him idle, yet he was never known to have done a good honest day's work in his life. Properly handled, he might have developed into a lay preacher, or a political stump-orator, for he had a glib tongue and an insinuating manner; but circumstances had kneaded him into the clay, and only the mould was wanting to shape him into a most serviceable kind of rogue. He did a good many odd jobs for the miller, whom he served with the fawning fidelity of a low-bred cur. So when Am swaggered up and down the place affirming with many strange oaths that it was "all rot, for the miller was a-going to buy the land of Mr. Kneebone, and had struck his lucky on the bargain," the idea of Kneebone being a secret agent of the squire died a natural death. And his neighbors, being creatures of prejudice, turned round on the poor romancist and dubbed him a liar. *Sic itur ad astra!*

Certain cynical persons have been known to doubt if there is in nature such a thing as a public mind; but on the whole it is perhaps the safer opinion to hold that the public has a mind of its own. And when its mind is exercised on any given subject, there springs up within it, like weeds in an ill-tended garden, a magnificent crop of idle stories and sensational reports. If you pull up one weed, another quickly takes its place. This is just what happened in the little section of the great world-mind called Voe. The secret-agent idea being uprooted, its place was occupied by the report that Christopher Kneebone had undertaken not to employ young Abel Boden as his assistant.

Some said this was out of common respect for the miller, whose feelings toward his nephew were no secret; others, that the miller had spoken to Kneebone on the subject; while a

third party were cocksure that Abel Boden had been offered the place and had refused it. By the bulk of the natives, however, this last version of the case was looked upon as dogma pure and simple; especially as its adherents, like dogmatists in general, were so cocksure that they waxed wroth or scornful when pressed for proof. But, travelling by different roads, they nevertheless all reached Rome. All agreed that Abel Boden was not going to work for Christopher Kneebone. With a few significant and a few insignificant exceptions, everybody was sorry at the news; nothing more to the praise of Voe could well be said. For Abel, though born and bred in the place, was very much of a stranger and no little of a mystery to the Voese. He was a capital workman—Jack Wragg would not have kept him a month if he had not been equal to any smith in the valley—but he was never by any chance to be met with in that local House of Commons, the Nag's Head. He was good-tempered, genial, had a nod for every man, and a remark on the weather or a "How d'ye do?" for every woman; the children loved him with their own sweet, selfish love. But he had no companions, and, worse than all, no sweetheart.

The maidens of Voe, a bonnie brigade—I wish that half a dozen of their portraits could have faced this page, for prettier illustrations no writer could desire—said some very hard and cruel and false things about him; but they did not believe a word of it in their hearts, wherein they cockered a sneaking affection for the gentle monster. Of a retiring disposition, shy and touched with melancholy, people said that he brooded over his father's misfortune.

For some years now Abel had lived with old Nathan Wass, the broom-maker, in the weird-looking cottage built of tufa-stone, on the edge of the wood under the moor. Folk called Nathan old because he was turned eighty, which Nathan himself thought was a very poor reason, seeing that his back was still straight and his eyes were undimmed, and his feelings were as fresh and lusty as any young fellow of fifty could desire. Many was the time that Nathan said to young Abel: "Cheer up, lad. Thy father's none dead; he's making money in some foreign land, you may depend on it. Some day he will break silence, and let us know how he's getting along." And for a long time Abel found comfort in the words, and bore up bravely; but as year after year went by, and no tidings came, he began to lose hope, and his heart grew sad and his spirit melancholy. He withdrew himself more and more from company, sought solitude, and foregathered with the souls of lonely places and the silent spirits of the rocks and the trees. And these threw over

him something of their own mystery and gloom. Yet, without knowing it, he was imbibing the best of all tonics, and strengthening the secret roots of his sanity.

The man who as a lad of five knew the names of all the trees and the flowers, and could tell which hive a passing bee came from, was not heading for insanity when he took to the moors and the woods. It looked a bit uncanny of him, after a hard day's work, to set out with his gun and a curious assortment of bottles and boxes, to spend the greater part of the night roaming in the fields and the woods.

The keepers viewed him with no little of suspicion, though his rig-out and general character were scarcely those of a poacher; but though they kept a sharp eye on him at first, they let him alone, for he carried in his pocket Squire Saxton's written permission to carry a gun all over the estate, which took in miles of woodland and moor. This night-hunting after birds and moths and beetles, and all kinds of curious vermin, was something that Voe could not understand; it did not legitimately belong to any sane man's work, much less a blacksmith's. The neighbors wagged their heads over it in a solemn manner; had it been any one else than Abel Boden, they would have wagged their tongues also.

Meanwhile, Abel had revived his passion for woodcraft, and had developed into an enthusiastic naturalist; he made a splendid collection of nocturnal birds, which he stuffed himself—of plants and insects. He studied from nature the principles of the fox, the morals of the badger, and the politics of the polecat. The nuisance was—there was no money in it. If he could only have made it self-paying he would gladly have dropped his hammer for good, and have devoted himself to natural-history pursuits. His inability to do this bred a little bitter root of discontent with his lot; but, on the other hand, his close and loving contact with nature was an antidote to melancholy, and fed his spirit with the sweet and healthful juices of life.

It was a sad day for Abel when he heard the news that was on everybody's tongue, that Christopher Kneebone was about to dispense with his services. He was still at the forge daily, doing bits of work that could not well wait, and keeping the thing going, as it were. Every few minutes, the whole day long, somebody would drop in and express their regret that he was going to leave. One or two of them mentioned the rumor that he had refused to work for Kneebone, and asked him if he had got another place. "Nay, I've not been asked, nor said a word on the subject that I know of. Truth is, I haven't spoken

a word to him yet," answered Abel; and in half an hour the whole village knew of his answer. That night Abel stayed in and spent his time rearranging some dried plants. The little room was bright with the firelight, and through the uncurtained window was visible the black face of a steep cliff, with a narrow slip of moonlit sky at the top.

"Thou mustna let it fret thee, lad; for them as talks so much nowadays mostly lie. Why should Mr. Kneebone give thee the sack without trying thee first? That's what I would like to know," said Nathan, puffing slowly his short clay pipe, black as ebony, as he sat in his arm-chair by the fire.

"They say as how the miller has been at him," said Abel, from a stool on the other side of the hearth.

"Happen he has: he's mean enow for that. But he isn't everybody. I, for one, can say as many good words for thee as he can bad uns. And I will, and others will too. Drat him! I'll have a talk with the squire, if it comes to that."

"Nay, it isn't worth while, Nathan, thank you. I might as well go now as later; he'll drive me out one way or another. I'm afraid I shall feel mighty lonesome and homesick, though, when I've left the old place."

"Thou art like thy father, lad. He thought as how roaming 'ud kill him. But thou art none gone yet—no, no, thou art none gone yet, lad. Come to that, I can find thee work enow; I've more than I can get through."

Abel shook his head and answered: "That'll none work, Nathan. I'm not up to broom-making, and I'll live by my own hands, if I have to break stones on the road."

"And who wants thee to idle? Not me. I say I can double my trade in a month, if I only get somebody to help me. Thou art o'er-proud lad—o'er-proud."

"Happen I am; but it's in the blood, and it will stay there, I hope. My trade is smithery, and I know what I'm worth at it. I'm not worth my salt outside of it. Ay, if these things would only get me a crust of bread, I'd live on it and be thankful," exclaimed Abel, touching with his foot a pile of half a dozen cases filled with beautiful specimens of insects.

"It's a rich man's hobby thou art riding, more's the pity. But never mind, lad; happen they are worth to thee more than money. They look as how they might be themselves the little devils, black and blue and green, and the Lord knows what color, that one time made us how they 'ud get into thee and eat thee up. But thou'lt none leave, lad. Come to that, and demme if I don't put a flea into thy uncle's ear that'll bite

like an adder!" cried the old man, his face working with passion, while he shook his fist at the fire.

Little more was said on the subject, but it had hold of Nathan, and kept him awake most of the night. The thought of losing Abel, to whom he had become strongly attached, was more than the old man could stand. He had begun by advising Abel not to fret about it, and here he was tossing about restlessly on his bed, and unable to get a wink of sleep, for fretting about it.

In the morning, breakfast over and Abel off to work, Nathan went into the little workshop at the back of the house and began splitting bands for the brooms. He worked two or three hours; then he got up, and locking up the house and hiding the key under the ivy at the end of the workshop, where Abel would be able to find it, he entered the wood that covered the steep slope in front of the cottage. Twenty minutes later he emerged from the wood on the top of the hill, and, crossing a stile, entered Voe park. Half a mile away, the chimneys of the Hall were visible above the tops of the trees, and Nathan made in that direction. He walked slowly, with hesitation in his gait. He felt he was about to do a bold thing; and though he thought all the world of the squire, and knew he would be treated kindly, he was none the less nervous. But the mischievous and erratic imp, whose pleasure is to so manipulate circumstances as to thwart and disappoint the expectations and desires of mankind, is sometimes in a genial mood, and plays into our hands with a mock beneficence. Squinting through the gray clouds at Nathan, and peradventure noting that he had had eighty years of fun out of him, said imp grew kind, and gently taking the old man by the ear, led him, as it were, into a green pasture instead of a slimy bog. Nathan came to two roads: the one to the left, running over the high shoulder of land, was the shorter way to the Hall; the one to the right, dipping down into the hollow, and running round a thick growth of oak-trees, was the longer way by a quarter of a mile.

Nathan stood still, as if undecided which way to take. Gumption the one-eyed—born guide of blind men—tugged at his left side. Nathan, not knowing who was pulling it, put up his hand and scratched his right ear; then he bore to the right, and went on toward the oaks—Gumption scolding like a fish-wife, Imp smiling like a seraph. Half-way round the belt of oaks, whom should he meet but the squire, gun in hand and a couple of setters by his side! Poor Gumption fell suddenly dumb.

"Good-morning, Nathan. Glad to see you looking so hearty. Are you never going to grow old?"

"Good-morning, squire, and thank you. Happen I shall never feel old in this world, sir, no more than these oaks. I mind them being planted, sir, seventy years ago this very spring."

"That is a long time ago. Were you by at the time?"

"I was, sir. It seems only yesterday, so to speak. There was the old squire, your grandfather, sir, and his lady, and a couple of young ladies as was a-staying at the Hall. The squire, your father, sir, married the prettiest of them. The ladies had little spades with silver handles, and planted every one of them a tree apiece. Young Luke Boden, the miller's father, had the overseeing of the job; and—if I might be so bold, sir, I'd like to say a word to you about young Abel, the smith, sir."

"Certainly, Nathan; what is it? I thought a great deal of his father, poor fellow," said the squire, putting his back against a tree, and by the same token giving Nathan to understand that he was in no hurry: a small action, but one the broom-maker thoroughly understood and appreciated. The turn given to the conversation was sufficiently abrupt, but the squire manifested no surprise. The working of the rustic mind was to him no novelty.

Said Nathan slowly, "It's the talk of the place, sir, as how Mr. Kneebone, the new smith, as has bought poor Jack Wragg's place, isna a-going to keep on Abel, sir."

"Indeed! I am sorry to hear that. What sort of a man is this Kneebone? Do you know anything of him?"

"No, sir, naught. I saw him at the sale, sir, and he looked anything but a likely man for a smith."

"I hear he has come from foreign parts—America, I think."

"Like as not, sir. Them Yankees are all gents, to their own way of thinking. I've heard as how their last president, as they call him, was brought up a smith, sir. Maybe Mr. Kneebone has been a president?"

The squire laughed. "Not likely, Nathan, or he would hardly step into Jack Wragg's shoes. Why is he discharging Abel?"

"They say, sir, that Miller Boden has been at him."

"Oh, I see. Well, it is rather mean of a man to persecute his own flesh and blood in that way."

"And the lad never so much as said a spiteful word agen him all his life. Drat him! if I was Abel I'd give him a downright cussing, and see if it happen to do him good," said Nathan, with no little energy.

"I am not sure but what it would do him good," laughed the squire.

"No doubt on it, sir, if it was only followed up with a taste of good stout ash. Drat it! I'm none too old to do it neither, sir, on occasion."

"Oh, come, I mustn't have you brought up before me charged with assault and battery. Seriously, I have been very displeased with the miller lately. The way he opposed Mr. Sims at the sale was anything but neighborly."

"Shameful, sir, just shameful. And I've bethought me, sir, as how you might put in a word for Abel, if you would be so kind, sir?"

"How do you mean, Nathan?"

"With Mr. Kneebone, sir. I reckon he 'ud rather oblige you, sir, than the miller. You find him six times as much work as he does, sir."

The squire looked studiously at the rooks.

"I canna abide to think of him leaving, sir; and you mind what a good servant his poor father was, sir."

"Yes, yes, poor fellow; I'd give something to know what became of him. Well, Nathan, I'll do what I can for him. Good-morning." And whistling his dogs, the squire passed on.

CHAPTER IV

MOTH-HUNTING IN WINTER

YEWDALE BRIDGE lies in a hollow, surrounded by high, well-wooded hills. From whatever point of the compass you approach it, the town lies deep below you; and in summer, when it is imbedded in foliage, it suggests a nest full of eggs. Somehow there seems no sufficient reason why the town should be where it is, and one always comes upon it with a feeling of surprise. It dates from the Deluge; and its market-day is on Tuesday, on which day it collects within itself, as in a natural reservoir, many streams of rustic humanity. In a bee-line it is about five miles from Voe; but as mortals travel, corkscrew-wise, it is nearly seven.

In Voe dialect, it was "markut-day at Yewdle Brig." The snow lay hard upon the ground, and the gray, motionless clouds, that had hidden the sun for a whole week, seemed to lie as hard and solid against the sky. It was difficult to retain one's respect for the sun, to say nothing of the moon and the stars, in front of that all-conquering, cruel-faced cloud. The pallid, shivering daylight had crept timidly for some few hours across the cruel face, and had vanished at last, like a frightened ghost, down the mysterious slopes in the west, where lie the graves of the Bright Ones. Then darkness sprang forth from its secret lair, and overran the face of the earth.

Through an open door and a low, wide, diamond-paned window of the miller's house at Voe, came the bright and cheerful light from a roaring wood-fire. It fell in splashes upon the snow in the court-yard, the bright flames bringing out the whiteness as they leaped up at intervals, while the ruddy glow of the fire warmed various snowy projections into a semblance of its own color. The house stands away from the road, which is some distance below it, and at night it looks as though it were buried in a wood. A steep slope is at the back, covered with pines and larches, and there is a sound of running water among the trees. Taken as a square, the house forms one side, the road below another; the left side is formed of cow-sheds with granaries above them, with the mill at the farther end; on the

right side, opposite the mill, is a stack-yard, then comes an orchard, and lastly a garden, devoted to vegetables until it nears the house, when it becomes transformed into a sweet medley of fruits and flowers. In the stack-yard are five or six ricks, mostly hay, parallelogrammatic in shape, with thatched hip-roofs. Near to one of these stand a man and a maiden. Are they lovers?

The night is raw and biting cold; but the man's hands are not in his pockets, and the girl has not even a shawl over her shoulders, yet both are as warm as toast-and-butter. Does not their temperature betray them? It is too dark to see the features of the girl, but there is light enough from the snow to reveal the fact that she is tall and of graceful figure.

"When do you expect the miller back from Yewdle Brig?" inquires the man, as the sound of wheels crunching the snow becomes audible.

Surely, surely we have heard that voice before, gentle, musical, and touched with melancholy! It is the voice of the gentle monster whose condemnation, in the hearts of the maidens of Voe, is that he has no sweetheart, unless it is some great spotted moth. The girl listens a moment or two to the sound of wheels before she answers:

"That is not father's trap, it is too heavy. But I expect him back soon. Let us talk about it, Abel. You don't really think that father has had anything to do with it, do you?"

"I am not sure, of course. But it is what they all say. And Am Ende doesn't say nay."

"Oh, I hate him, the wretch! If he is not a rogue, he ought to be prosecuted for obtaining a character under false pretences!"

"You are no friend of Am's, I'm afraid, Ruth?" said Abel, with a laugh.

"He is a cunning, idle knave—that is my opinion of him, and I fancy he knows it; but never mind him. Abel, you won't think of going away?"

"Why not? Who would fret?"

"Everybody in the place would."

"Everybody means nobody."

"Would Nathan Wass fret?"

"Ah, yes! I beg his pardon, dear old fellow. I think he would miss me a bit."

"And nobody else?" asks Ruth, drawing three inches nearer to Abel.

"No, nobody else."

"O Abel, for shame! I should cry my eyes out. I couldn't

get on without you now, laddie. You are my all," cries Ruth, with something in her voice that Abel has never heard before.

A quick, strong thrill goes through him. The lover has ever a fox's eye, and can see in the dark. Abel gives one glance, then he opens his arms and closes them—with Ruth inside. It is their first embrace, and having as yet no idea of economy of force, there is a needless expenditure of strength. Vigor makes up what may be lacking in grace, in this first, sweet, strong clasp of love.

Having half-smothered her, Abel murmurs, "Say it again, darling. Say that you love me, that I am your all. It goes through me like a great gust of life. Say it, sweetheart!"

"Yes; you are my *all*, MY ALL, MY ALL!"

There is another needless expenditure of strength, which is checked of a sudden by Ruth saying in a low, quick voice:

"That's the trap coming round the corner! What in the world were we doing not to have heard? Be careful, dearest. Good-night."

A hurried kiss, and Ruth speeds along the court-yard and enters the house, as the miller, leaving the turnpike road, slowly ascends the short, steep lane leading to the mill.

Meanwhile, Abel has dropped from the rick-yard into the thick pine-holt at the side, and going down the hill as the miller comes up, reappears at the point where the lane joins the road. And there we may leave him, for we have seen enough of the gentle rustic naturalist for one night. The scamp!—a pretty kind of moth-hunting indeed!

In the little sitting-room at the Nag's Head sat Christopher Kneebone. He had arrived unexpectedly in the afternoon. While a fire was being lighted and the room warmed, Kneebone went upstairs and lay down, being tired, as he said, with travelling all night.

It was dark when the maid knocked at his door and said, "If you please, sir, tea will be ready in ten minutes."

In ten minutes Kneebone was downstairs. The fire, a red, glowing mass, was half-way up the chimney; a couple of lamps—one on the sideboard and another on the centre-table—filled the room with light. Kneebone stood on the hearth, with his back to the fire and his hands behind him, and made a critical survey of the table. The cloth was spotlessly white, the china was fine, and knives and forks and spoons and cruet-stand shone resplendently. There was a thoroughbred look about the amber-crusted loaf of home-baked bread and the roll of kingcup-tinted butter, while the cream in the large glass jug looked

proud and pure. The boiled ham, newly cut into, looked quite coquettish with its sprigs of parsley and bracelet of ruffled pink paper, though it was not altogether successful in its attempt to eclipse the great joint of cold beef, that stood upon the side-board as if conscious of its rich flavor and mellow beauty. A couple of wee dunce's-caps, worked in pale blue and gold and white shades of wool, attracted Kneebone's attention; he stepped forward and lifted one of them up gently, with thumb and finger, as if it had been a delicate insect. Underneath, in gold-and-white cup, was a boiled egg with a face as brown as a gypsy's skin. Then there were hot muffins, and bright golden marmalade, and sundry preserves, whose charms were lost upon the tobacco-loving palate of the hungry creature, whose jaws began to ache with sweet desire. Presently he sat down and began the glad work of destruction. No: we will let the eggs pass, and the marmalade, and the muffins; we will not count the number of slices of ham and cuts of beef; we will be blind to the rapidly attenuating shapes of butter and bread, and it would have been idiocy not to have made hot love to the languishing cream. The man was hungry with a noble omnivorous, and, for a goodly time, unappeasable hunger. And if the victuals had any inkling of their destiny, they were questionless proud of ministering to such a primal appetite, unweakened by any taint of dyspepsia, and right glad to find such a mill to grind them into elements of humanity.

The repast was nearly ended, and Kneebone, who had been going like an express train, was slackening speed as he approached the terminus, when the landlord came in with an air of excitement.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Kneebone, but Squire Saxton would like to see you," he said, panting like a man out of breath.

"The squire!" exclaimed Kneebone; then he added in a different—that is to say, an indifferent—tone, "Who is Squire Saxton?"

"Why, bless me, he's the squire, neither more nor less! Shall I show him into the best room for you?"

"No. He is not a king's son, I suppose, nor an angel from heaven, is he?"

"Lors! no, sir; he's a bigger man than that: he owns all round here for miles."

"Indeed! How did he know I had arrived?" inquired Kneebone, slicing a large wafer from the joint.

"He just put his head inside the door and said, 'Hey, Jerry! has Mr. Kneebone got back yet?'"

"'Yes, squire,' says I, all of a fluster."

“‘Will you tell him I should like to speak with him for a few minutes?’ says he. And we mustn’t keep him a-waiting, you know.”

“All right; show him in.”

“Not in here, Mr. Kneebone! It isn’t the place for him, you know—not with all these things about.”

“Ho! Then take him into the bar, give him a pipe and a glass of hot Scotch—you can put it in my bill, you know—and tell him to make himself comfortable till I have finished this joint and picked the bones clean. Then I will join him with a pipe,” said Kneebone, slowly and deliberately.

The landlord’s under jaw dropped, and his eyes opened wide with amazement and horror. A short, sandy-whiskered man was the landlord, with no trace of jolly Boniface about him. Of sanguine temperament, and with a well-developed bump of veneration, he bore the lively name of Jerry Hearse. Yokel wit, which “keeps the ground and never soars,” knew him familiarly as “the Bierman.”

“My stars! I’d much liefer jump into the Scarthin!” he gasped, wondering to himself how a quiet and decent-seeming man like his guest could come by such monstrous notions. He looked at the roof, but it showed no signs of falling!—at Kneebone, who continued to swallow and was unchoked! Then the squire-worshipper called to mind that the mill of the gods grinds slowly but it grinds exceeding small; and he was comforted.

Said Kneebone sardonically, “I have no objection to offer, if you prefer it.”

Whereat the landlord seemed a trifle staggered, and reconsidering the position, made answer:

“Happen it’ll be better to show him in here.”

“As you like,” replied Kneebone coolly, as the landlord turned and left the room.

No sooner was the door closed than Kneebone rose quickly and made a dash for the gilt-framed mirror, encircled with yellow gauze, which stood on the mantel-piece. What would have seemed natural enough in a woman seemed odd in a man, and one who was as free from any trace of vanity as an owl. Arrived at the glass, a woman would have gone through a series of swift and dexterous movements of the hands; she would have touched her hair, her face, her throat gear, her ornaments, and any bits of lace or ribbon in sight; and every touch would have told for better or worse—for better, if we were betting on it—in the picture of her own sweet self. His little black tie was unfastened, a button of his waistcoat was

open, two crumbs were caught like flies in the meshes of his chestnut beard; but Christopher Kneebone did not raise a finger to set himself to rights. Apparently he only gave a searching look at his own countenance, then with an audible sigh he stepped back to his seat, and began afresh the discussion of muffins and marmalade.

The door opened, the curtains were pushed aside, and Jerry Hearse, obsequious as a lap-dog, announced "The squire, sir—Squire Saxton, Mr. Kneebone."

"That will do, Hearse. You can leave us now," said the squire, a little brusquely. If he had his worshippers—and great men, like coins, have their natural parasites—the squire had no great respect for them or their worship. Hearse vanished like a shot.

Kneebone had risen, and now, with his *serviette* in his left hand, he bowed slightly to his visitor and said, "Good-evening, sir. I am just finishing my tea, but that need not interfere with our talk. Will you take a seat, sir, on the sofa? I suppose it is no use offering you a cup of tea?"

"Thank you, but I don't mind if I do take a cup. I am afraid I came in at a very unseasonable time, but——"

"No apology is needed, sir. I call their tea tiptop here, which is something remarkable. Good tea at a hotel is as rare as snow in harvest," said Kneebone, ringing the bell, which was answered in a flash by Hearse himself.

"Bring in another cup and saucer for the squire, please, and another hot muffin."

"Yes, sir; thank you, sir; in a moment or two, sir," said Hearse, retreating precipitately, overwhelmed with the idea of Squire Saxton drinking tea, like any common man, in the Nag's Head with Mr. Kneebone. He felt that it dignified him, dignified the Nag's Head, dignified Mr. Kneebone, dignified Martha the maid who toasted the squire's muffin, dignified Mrs. Hearse who buttered it; and yet, somehow, it was as wonderful and mysterious as any of the ways of Providence. Indeed, it had a real smack of a genuine old-fashioned miracle, thought Jerry; and straightway he had a solemn feeling come over him, and a sense of having been to church.

"Now, Jerry, the muffin is ready, and you mind you don't go and drop the cup and saucer, which is one of poor Aunt Maria's blue-and-gold set, and I wouldn't have 'em broke, not for no money," said Mrs. Hearse to her spouse.

There was good reason for her caution, for Jerry was very excited, and moved about very much like a cat on hot tiles.

Kneebone poured the squire a cup of tea, and said, "You will sugar and cream for yourself, squire."

"Thank you," answered the squire, putting a chair to the table and sitting down. He pronounced the muffin good and the tea capital.

"Try another cup, won't you?"

"I think I will, and I will have a bit of that crust with it," said the man of many acres, seizing the bread-knife and cutting off the clean smooth amber crust half-way down the side of the loaf. He cut it into narrow slips, and soaking them in his tea, ate them slowly and with evident relish.

"I fancy you will find Voe rather a quiet little place. You have travelled, I understand?" said the squire, enjoying the novelty of the situation. He was a man of strong prejudices, and had already taken a great liking to Christopher Kneebone. There is much of the irrational in the likings and dislikings of most of us.

"Well, yes, I'm one of the rolling stones of the race."

"I have known some of those stones to gather pretty well of moss, though, in the teeth of the old proverb. I hope you are one of them. Been to India, may I ask?"

"No, sir, I am sorry to say I have not, but hope to some day. New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the States have been my camping-grounds."

"A pretty wide pasture to feed in. I suppose you are tired of roaming now, and have chosen Voe to go to sleep in?"

"That's about it, sir. There is no grass so green nor sky so blue as Old England's. Many a time I used to think that my poor ghost would be restless and unhappy, if I was not buried under English sod. Curious, sir, how English folk, who go everywhere and do everything, and scutter about the world like rabbits in their native warren, yearn for Old England like babies for their mothers' breasts," said Kneebone, with an accent of personal experience that was almost pathetic.

"Yes, come to think of it, it is funny. How do you account for it?"

"Don't know there is any accounting for it, unless it be that there is so much of the land in us, and so much of us in the land."

"How do you mean?"

"Supposing that there had never been a funeral in England, never a grave dug from John-o'-Groat's to Land's End, but, from the Romans down, every dead body had been thrown into the sea or carried to some foreign land. There would have been an immense quantity of human dust missing, there would have

been so much less soil in the land, and what there had been would have lacked something it has got now. We live on the soil, sir, and we have put hundreds of millions of tons of sacred and beloved dust into the ground, and mixed it like a leaven in the earth. And somehow I fancy there's a kind of blood-kinship now between us and Old England."

"A pretty theory, at any rate, Mr. Kneebone. I don't know that I exactly follow you or go with you. Singular notion rather, but at bottom there is something in it, no doubt. In some way it seems to put a touch of life and affection into the land; and, come to think of it, why, the land's chock-full of it," said the squire.

"Chock-full of it, sir! Town men don't know it, maybe, but country men do."

"Ha! you like the country, then?"

"Well, yes. I've seen a lot of town life in my time, but—the country for me. It is my Jerusalem, which I prefer above my chief joy."

"I am glad to hear it, Mr. Kneebone. It is a mark of sanity. I should have thought that you and young Abel Boden would have hit it off together very well. He is quite a naturalist, I believe."

"You mean Boden the smith?"

"Yes. There is some talk, I believe, of his leaving the village. I should be very sorry indeed for him to go away. Don't you think you could manage to keep him on? They say there is not a better workman round here for miles."

Kneebone hesitated for a while before he answered, "I'm sure the young fellow ought to be much obliged to you, squire."

"Not at all. I do not like to see a decent lad like him unfairly used. I understand there are those who would be only too glad to do him an ill turn. And I believe in fair play."

CHAPTER V

ROOK'S NEST

"THAT'S English, anyway, squire. I should be sorry to do Boden an injustice. Of course he is nothing to me, and all I want is a good reliable workman. What is this story I hear about his father having to fly the country?" inquired Kneebone, resting his knife and fork upon the plate and looking hard at the squire.

"It is an old tale, and was a very sad piece of business. I have always regretted that Abel Boden didn't come back and give us his version of the story. I'll never believe that he deliberately tried to injure his brother. The miller says that he flung him over the cliff. Perhaps he did; I have no evidence to the contrary, and the miller was certainly badly bruised. But the question in my mind is, Was it not done in self-defence?"

"There were no witnesses, then?"

"Yes, Nathan Wass, the broom-maker—I don't know whether you have met him?"

"Yes, I have seen him, I believe."

"An odd man, rather lonely in his ways; was meant for a hermit, I fancy, only hermits are out of date. But he is a thoroughly veracious man, and he said at the time that he saw the struggle from the wood. He was not prepared to swear who began the conflict, but he hinted pretty clearly that it was not our shepherd. You must understand Abel was my head shepherd."

"Oh, indeed! Then you knew him, did you?"

"Better than I knew my own brother."

"He was about my age, wasn't he?—I mean, he would be about my age now."

The squire bestowed a critical glance upon Kneebone's face and replied, "Hardly. I should judge you are not far from sixty, while Abel would not have been more than fifty-one or two at the outside. We were both much of an age, and as lads were together a good deal. He taught me how to throw a line, set a wire, lime a twig, find a nest, catch a squirrel, and lots of

other things. His woodcraft was first-rate. It was from him that young Abel inherited his taste for natural history. I wish he would give up smithery and turn gamekeeper, then I could look after him better."

"Rather fiery in his temper, though, was the shepherd, wasn't he?" said Kneebone, who seemed almost eager to learn all he could about the long-missing man.

"Fiery! As mild as his own sheep. Like his son, he was of a singularly gentle disposition—pensive rather than melancholy. If he got roused, somebody would catch it; but it took a great deal to rouse him. How the miller can continue to cherish a grudge against his brother's son, I do not understand."

"I am afraid he doesn't waste much affection on him."

"There is one thing to be said: the miller has never been like the same man since the day his brother disappeared. He has a dark spirit now, morose and surly. Once he was sound in politics and religion, but of late years—but there, I forget you are a stranger. I am glad to know you, Mr. Kneebone, and though I haven't your promise, I feel sure you will not work against Boden, whatever you may decide to do."

The squire had risen, and Kneebone did likewise. The latter stood stroking his beard in silence for some moments. At last he said:

"Squire, they will say I've done it to please you. I don't care a red cent what they say, for the matter of that, but I don't wish folk to think meanly of me, at the start, if I can help it."

"I understand you perfectly," said the squire, with a quick flush and frown. "We are fallen upon evil times: people still believe in their idols, but they are ashamed of their honest belief being known. So they mock in the market-place what they worship in the wood. It is a note of progress, I suppose, and of course you believe in progress, Mr. Kneebone?"

"Down hill? Oh, yes, sir. I'm bound to. I see it going on all round me. But what I was going to say is this: if I keep on young Boden, I don't want you to think, squire, that I have done it just because you asked me. You will excuse me, sir, I know, but I mean that if the tables had been turned, and you had been trying to do the mean thing by the young fellow and the miller the fair thing, I should have sided with the miller, sir, if you had been the Duke of Peakshire himself."

"I believe you, Mr. Kneebone," laughed the squire, "for his Grace is not a formidable man at all. And as far as that goes,

my forefathers were Esquires of Voe when his were simple wool-merchants with a growing trade."

Fine and beautiful was the subtle change of inflection that occurred during this statement of a simple fact of comparative history. It is not every day that one hears the genuine accent of a more than ducal pride, and he is a man of a million who can pit himself with delicate scorn against a live duke and live. An odd world, my masters! Full of little creatures whose breath is in their nostrils, and who dream dreams that would put a modest seraph to the blush. The squire had hold of the handle of the door, when Kneebone said:

"One moment, squire, if you please. I understand that you would have liked that bit of land down by the Scarthin?"

"Well, yes," said the squire, coming forward, "I should have liked it very much, but I wasn't prepared to cover it with gold. I would give double its market value any day for it."

"That's about what I gave for it—not that I wanted the land, only it went with the house and shop, and I meant to have them at any price."

"Do you mean you will sell it?" asked the squire, eagerly. The ambition of a century seemed about to be realized.

"I thought at one time of letting the miller have it, but not now, not for a thousand pounds. You may have it, squire, and welcome. I like a man that believes in fair play."

Out went the squire's hand, and, meeting the blacksmith's, a hearty shake followed.

"Thank you, Mr. Kneebone, thank you very much indeed. You have done me a very great favor. I like your disposition more than I can say, and I am right glad to have you settle among us. Mr. Sims shall call and settle about the transfer and what-not. Put your own price on the land, and you will find that the Saxtons have long memories, and are never ungrateful." Having so said, the squire left Kneebone alone.

"I believe it, though he did stammer over it. The Saxtons have long memories, and are never ungrateful. Ah, well, they don't raise 'Esquires of Voe' in any country except Old England, and if they are dying out here, it's a darned shame, as Cousin Jonathan would say," soliloquized Kneebone, getting his pipe and ringing for the table to be cleared.

The Jack Wragg place stood in about the middle of the village, on pretty high ground, with a glorious outlook. But blacksmiths in general, having something else to think about, would not give an odd sixpence a year for the most glorious outlook in creation. There are exceptions of course: Jack Wragg when in the flesh—and the spirit—would stand and look

at the magnificent expanse of hill and dale, wood and meadow, river and sky, and the slopes of the climbing uplands, for a whole minute together; and lifting his bare brawny arms would remark to himself, if no one else was within speaking distance, "Blest if there's a prettier picter outside o' heaven!" For which oft-repeated sentiment he was labelled "Heavenly Jack."

The cottage was built of stone, with a thatched roof and overhanging eaves; in front there were two lancet-windows downstairs, and two semicircular ones upstairs, which gave a distinct character to the place. It was approached by ten or a dozen steps, was surrounded by a garden that might well have been a section of the original Eden; the whole being ringed in with a thick neatly trimmed thorn-hedge. A stream ran through the garden, and on one side of the house was a noble elm-tree. The smithy was on a line with the road lower down the hill, adjoining the garden. It was completely sheltered by another elm of great age and size and vigor. Exceeding pleasant to the eye was the sight of this ringing hive of industry, at the foot of the old tree with its lofty and wide-reaching branches. There was something idyllic in smithy and cottage embedded in a superb landscape. One called to mind the words of Evelyn: "Here my cousin William Clanville's eldest son showed me such a lock for a door, that for its filing and rare contrivances was a masterpiece, yet made by a country blacksmith. But we have seen watches made by another with as much curiosity as the best of that profession can brag of; and, not many years after (1654), there was nothing more frequent than all sorts of iron-work more exquisitely wrought and polished than in any part of Europe, so as a door-lock of a tolerable price was esteemed a curiosity even among foreign princes." And remembering that hammer and anvil had been the instruments of a fine and beautiful art, one was tempted to envy the lot of the blacksmith of Voe.

In the course of a few days there came from the great city, seventy miles away, a band of workmen, including masons, bricklayers, carpenters, painters, and plumbers. They were put up at the Nag's Head, and the next morning, headed by Kneebone and the gaffer, marched up to the cottage, followed by a wondering troop of Voese—men, women, and children. The spectators, however, were not allowed into the garden, and had to content themselves with standing at the gate, watching the movements of the workmen in front of the cottage, and exchanging ideas on the subject of Christopher Kneebone's sanity, wisdom, and wealth. As all of these points were open

to controversy, and were more or less involved in doubt, the sole medium of unanimity lay in a fluctuating and semi-sarcastic scepticism. The workmen, meanwhile, were busy inspecting in their idle-seeming way the quaint little structure they were to operate upon. When they first stood in front of it, in a group, they looked at each other, and broke out in loud laughter. They had thought they were in for a big job at some fine house in the country.

Carpenter. "I say, Bill, this is a fine mansion, ain't it?"

Plumber. "In the Hitalian style."

Mason. "Th' picter-gallery's at the back. Where's the ball-room, Jim?"

Carpenter. "Never you mind. 'Tain't open for inspection, only on visiting days."

Mason. "Dunna you see it's part of a old habbey? Look at th' winders."

Plumber. "How many on us will it hold at once, Jim?"

Carpenter. "Two on us wi' our coats off—one upstairs and as many down."

Plumber. "We'll form a percession, and go in one at a time, eh?"

Mason. "We mun go out by th' back door, or we'll get wedged agen one another."

Plumber. "Let's lift it on to a barrow, and wheel it back to town, and show it off for a penny a head as a big bee-hive."

Carpenter. "An owl's nest, Bill, 'ud do better than a bee-hive, with you inside for th' howl. The boys 'ud never find out the trick."

In this wise they shot their pellets of good-natured contempt at the little brown-faced architectural dwarf, who bore it all silently, gravely; while its two semicircular eyes, gleaming with sunlight, shone brilliantly, wisely, serenely, from under its overhanging brow. It did not strive with its dumbness, nor desire to lift up its voice and cry aloud. Its thoughts were centuries old; and long contact with humanity had transformed it into a thing half human, and touched with gentle pity for the infirmities of the race. There be many of these dumb sympathists in the world, though we make small account of them.

After all, there was not much to be done at the Rook's Nest, as Kneebone christened his cottage. The painting and papering and whitewashing throughout was a light job, although it had to be done very thoroughly, and with no little taste. As the workmen came to understand the quality of work that was required of them, they were more contented. Somehow the

wee place caught them with a guile all its own, and changed the group of scoffers into warm admirers. Modistes divide women into two classes—those who set off their dresses and those who do not. They adore the first and despise the second. House-decorators will tell you that as it is with women so is it with houses: some will respond to every touch of the brush, and yield beautiful effects that strangely outrun the conscious effort of the workman. It is as if they had a subtile spirit within them that was only too glad to seize the opportunity of working unobserved, and of hiding its magic under the formal labor of a mechanic. While other houses, on the contrary, seem to be organically graceless and stubborn, work against the workman, and defy his best efforts to conceal their constitutional sluttishness.

Rook's Nest was a little thoroughbred, instinct with the spirit and the love of loveliness, and wore its new favors as sweetly and bravely as any house of high degree. The workmen—shrewd readers of architectural character—quickly discerned the quality of its temper: its soul was clean, docile, and apt; nothing was lost or thrown away upon it; it lent itself with mysterious facility to their best work, which seemed to mellow from day to day into something better than their best. They grew to respect the little place, to love it, to be proud of it. They put their soul into their work, to the huge astonishment of their gaffer and—themselves. It was the only use they had made of their soul for many a day; and selves and gaffer were no little taken aback to find how *a touch of soul* enhanced the market value of their work. It was like finding nuggets of gold in one's own garden. But they had small faith in their soul. They looked at their first bit of really *human* work, and doubted if they could keep it up, even if it fetched in the open market half-a-crown a day extra.

At the back of the house they built a small room, which Kneebone was having fitted up with bookcases let into the wall; above this was another room finished as a bath-room. When it got wind that Kneebone was a reading man and was building a library, the astonishment was universal and profound; but when it leaked out, a few days later, that a bath-room was also in the course of construction, wonder gave place to anger, ridicule, and contempt. Fancy Jack Wragg bemeaning himself to use a bath-room!

"Them o'er-clean folk be mostly knaves. The cleaner the outside the dirtier the inside. A bit o' honest dirt was aye a token o' piety among my forbears and all good Christians,"

were among the authentic apophthegms of the lamented Jack Wragg, and were sympathetically understood of the people.

That the squire and his lady should find a bath-room useful, was not to be wondered at or cavilled at; it was their nature, and went with the hall, and the crest, and the roan mare, and other notes of squiralty. In Christopher Kneebone, the foreigner, however, it was a very different matter, being nothing more or less than a reflection upon the ancient manners and customs of the Voese. A fine blacksmith he was, to be aping the ways of the gentry! Was he in reality a blacksmith?

A beautiful bone of suspicion to pick was this. It gave rise to a warm discussion that waxed into a fierce controversy. Oddly enough, the dispute narrowed itself down to the condition of Kneebone's hands; some said they were the hands of no smith, being white and soft; others as stoutly maintained that they were neither white nor soft. As it happened, Kneebone's hands had undergone a remarkable change during his ten days' absence after the sale. Miller Boden would hardly have recognized them; they had lost their idle look altogether, and bore the marks of genuine labor. It was a small point, but it carried the day in Kneebone's favor; the more so that it was generally felt that they had done him in thought a great injustice.

The controversy was cresting itself, just when it became known that Abel Boden was going to stay on at the forge. It was a very opportune piece of news, and weighed well for Kneebone in the scales of popular favor. It was generally spoken of as a backhander for the miller, and there was a widespread curiosity to know how he took it. Am Ende, the miller's parasite and mouthpiece, was attacked in the oblique native manner by half the village, but every effort to extract the desired information from him was unavailing. He swore, laughed, frowned, snapped his fingers and slapped his thighs, drank all the bribing glasses of beer to which he was treated, but to pump him exceeded native wit.

This reticence, in one who was loquacity incarnate, deceived many but not all. The Witan of the place shook their white heads gravely, and declared that the miller was "feeling badly bit." In his fury he was like unto a bull of Bashan, and he could nurse his fire like a smoking mountain. Sooner or later he would be even with the book-reading, bath-loving foreigner, as sure as wheat was wheat.

A rumor of all this came to the ears of Christopher Kneebone, but he only laughed and said, "Let the miller run the mill, and the smith the smithy. This is a free country, and if I like

I'll take on Old Harry himself, and teach him to shoe horses, let who will say nay."

This was brave speech, better even than anything reported of self-sufficient Jack Wragg. Voe heard it, and first looking round to see that neither Miller Boden nor Am Ende was in sight, laughed silently and approvingly from ear to ear.

A fortnight passed away, and with it the wild heart of March. The snow had gone altogether, save for the ridges under the upland walls, and the mounds in the hollows in the woods. It was wonderful how green and fresh the earth looked, now that its face was once more visible. It was a fine frosty noon when Christopher Kneebone came down from the cottage, where he had been watching the men at work, and set off for Yewdle Brig. He wanted to order a pair of big bellows for the smithy, the old ones having shown signs of impending dissolution. They had been put up in the time of Jack Wragg's father, getting on for fifty years ago, and had been mended so often that very little of their original composition remained. If Jack Wragg had not been in heaven, the old bellows would have been botched again; for the idea of getting new bellows was as foreign to him as that of getting new biceps. The new man brings the new world: Kneebone would have thought that sixpence laid out on the patched and odd-looking monster was so much money thrown away.

Kneebone did his business, and was on the point of starting homeward, when it began to snow heavily. The sun went down in a clear sky, however, scattering its red arrows among the snowflakes with miraculous chromatic effect. Kneebone, thinking that the storm was nothing but a bit of wanton frolic on the part of an isolated and irresponsible cloud, turned into the "Pig of Lead" and ordered a tea of ham and eggs. Still the snow came down thicker than ever, and the fiery west had hooded its splendor in gray and ghostly gloom. Kneebone left Yewdle Brig *inter canem et lupum*. It was a mile nearer across the fields, but he decided that it was wiser to keep the road. The twilight died away almost suddenly; according to the almanac there was a well-filled moon in the sky, and doubtless the almanac was correct, though not a ray of lunar light worked its way through the vast awning of cloud that seemed to be fast to the tops of the hills. Half-way home it ceased snowing, the wind fell, there was a strange calm, a weird silence, and darkness sevenfold thick was on the ground and in the air.

Christopher Kneebone was not a nervous man, nor superstitious, but as he stood on the top of the long hill leading down

to Voe, and listened, hearing no sound of living thing, only the low breathings of the solitary hills hidden in the darkness, and unearthly "sounds of undistinguishable motion," suggestive of the non-human spirits of air and woods and mountains—his sense of awe deepened into spiritual terror. Well as he knew nature and her myriad moods and innumerable costumes, never before had he seen her in such sable attire, in such attitude of mystery; motionless, silent, dumb, as though smitten dead with a sudden great vision of God. Kneebone drew a long breath that sounded like a deep sigh, and began to drop down the hill. It was so dark that he could barely make out the road. He was nearing Voe, and had reached the curve in the road some little distance above the mill, when he drew up suddenly, as a colossal black figure seemed to rise out of the earth and bar his way.

CHAPTER VI

POWERS OF DARKNESS

"HALLOA there! who are you?—a man or an elephant?" cried Kneebone.

"All right, stranger. It's as dark as a bag. How far to Yewdle Brig?" said a gruff voice.

"A good six mile, friend. Nasty night for walking."

"Been on the tramp all day, stranger. Happen ye have a copper to spare for a night's lodging?"

"Sorry to say I haven't got a copper on me. If I had, you should have it and welcome," answered Kneebone, moving aside.

"Got any siller on thee?"

"Silver do you mean?"

"Ei mon, siller or gowd 'ull do," said the black monster, contemptuously.

"Well, yes, I've got just as much silver and gold about me as I—mean to keep," replied Kneebone, in a significant tone. He had never seen the man he was afraid of, and the fellow's tone was insolent.

As he spoke, Kneebone's hand glided to his hip pocket, which contained his purse and a small silver-hilted six-shooter, once the property of a former friend of his. Said friend distinguished himself in England by studying medicine, shooting without a license other people's game, and slaughtering for his own amusement certain of my Lord Muchland's beautiful red-deer; then, following the star of empire, he moved quickly west, and from a cow-boy graduated with honors as a cattle-lifter and horse-stealer, and finally, on the Mexican border, flourished as a brigand chief. Dead now? Oh, no! such gentry are in no hurry to die. Within a day's ride of Granada is a delightfully situated monastery that looks a worthy home of clean-lived saints. Before a golden shrine, arrayed in gorgeous vestments, is a stalwart priest, with a tan upon his face that no asceticism can bleach. It is the brigand chief turned monk! That man's "Life" would knock the best romance out of the market, and here you have it, dear reader, in a nut-shell.

To return to our lamb cutlets: Kneebone's hand was on the revolver that had once belonged to the heavenly-minded monk. The unknown laughed at Kneebone's words and said:

"All right, stranger. It's too dark to quarrel, or I'd put some steel into you. Good night." He moved on up the road, and in a dozen steps all trace of him was lost in the darkness.

Kneebone continued his journey, but had not proceeded more than a hundred yards when he heard the unknown calling out, "Say, stranger, have you got a match on you?" He felt inclined to push on and pay no heed to the request, but second thoughts, kindlier if not wiser, prevailed, and he called out, "Yes, I've got a match on me. Where are you?"

"Blest if I can make out where you be," answered the unknown, whose voice sounded close at hand.

Kneebone turned to meet him, and as he did so, out from the wooded hillside sprang two black figures, and rushed upon him. It was evidently an ambush, and, remembering the sinister words about steel, Kneebone thought his life was in danger. He sent out a great cry of "Help! help! murd——" He fell on one knee, half stunned by a murderous blow from a thick stick. Before he could rally himself, the three men were upon him. They seized him violently, and seemed to be pulling him in all directions. For some moments he was too dazed to offer any resistance, and was only conscious of wondering to himself whether they would know where to strike to kill him with one blow of the dagger. But instead of stabbing and robbing him, they began to thrash him mercilessly with sticks, at the same time showering fierce oaths upon him—which, however, broke no bones—and abusing him for a foreign prig and damned Yankee swell, who was meddling with matters that did not belong to him. They were giving him a taste, a plum of the pudding to which he would be treated liberally in the future, if he did not get out of Voe bag and baggage.

This put a new light upon the matter. Kneebone's giddiness vanished; his faculties were in perfect order, and his blood was up. He was not going to be rattened into a jelly, if he knew it. With a sudden desperate effort, he planted his foot like a battering-ram on one fellow's stomach, and sent him flying backward. Of course, a soft guardian angel in the form of a grassy bank must be in the right spot to receive the flabbergasted villain, and prevent him from splitting his dear skull upon the hard road. With the delivery of his stroke, Kneebone sprang to his feet, the other two hanging on like bull-dogs. He sent out another loud cry for help, as he felt that they were trying to throttle him. The spirit of murder was awake now in

the hearts of his assailants. Kneebone felt it distinctly in the devilish clutch of their brawny hands. A shiver ran through him as the flabbergasted villain on the bank, recovering himself, sprang forward and muttered to his mates, "Hold him tight, and I'll finish him wi' my knife." "Mind yo' hit the right 'un," one of the couple gasped breathlessly, as they rolled about the road in a life-and-death struggle.

Kneebone's strength began to fail him; his head swam, and though he was fighting as men only do when they know it is for dear life, a fatal dizziness was creeping over him. Suddenly he became aware that a fifth figure had intertwined itself in that fierce serpentine coil of humanity, though his assailants did not yet realize it. Undetected in the darkness by the others, Kneebone felt its touch half-a-dozen times on various parts of his body, and each time a strange thrill went through him. Once its hand was upon his face, over which it moved quickly without attempting to close. It did not once speak, nor could he hear it breathe, though the others were panting loudly. Was it friend or foe? Was it man or angel? Kneebone trembled, but his strength grew. Whole stores of strength were unlocked, so that for a moment he fought himself free.

In that moment the figure was by his side, and whispered, "Who are you?"

"Christopher Kneebone."

"Ah!" Then in a loud voice he cried, as the villains closed upon him, mistaking him for Kneebone, "You knaves, I know you!"

As though they had suddenly been confronted by a row of fixed bayonets, the rogues fell back bewildered.

"Look out, Tim; it's the devil himself!" muttered one of them, in an unmistakable tone of horror. Then they turned and fled, two toward Yewdle Brig and one toward Voe.

Leaning with his hand heavily upon Abel Boden's shoulder, Christopher Kneebone drew his revolver and fired down the road at a venture. The bullet found its billet. A dreadful shriek rent the air. But the next moment the footsteps of the flying villain were distinctly audible, a pretty sure proof that he was more frightened than hurt.

"If I had only been as smart as the man to whom this shooter once belonged, one or two of those villains would have played an important part at a funeral, I am thinking," remarked Kneebone, as he put the weapon back into his pocket.

"It is better as it is. It's a terrible thing to take a man's life, even in self-defence. Are you hurt much?" inquired Abel.

"I'm a bit bruised maybe, but no bones broken, thank heaven! My lad, you've saved my life this time; they meant murder, if ever men did. I'll bear it in mind, lad, that I owe you my life."

"I'm downright glad I happened to hear you call out, Mr. Kneebone. I was down by the mill, and I thought I heard some one shout 'Help!' I started up the hill and listened, but could hear nothing. It was so dark I could make nothing out. I stood for a while, and was just thinking of going back when I heard you call out again. Were they footpads, do you think?"

"No, lad, they were none footpads. They were ratteners. They let the cat out of the bag when they began thrashing me."

"But they weren't Voe men—two of 'em, at any rate," objected Abel.

"How do you know that?" asked Kneebone.

"I felt their faces and hands."

"So did I, for the matter of that; fingers aren't eyes, though, lad," laughed Kneebone.

"They will tell as much as eyes, though, any day; at least mine will. Two of them were foreigners, as we say round here. I am not sure of the one that went down-hill. I fancy I know his face well enough."

"Who do you think it was? Let me know, lad, and I'll teach somebody a lesson they won't forget in a day."

The two men had reached the point where the lane from the mill joined the road. Said Abel, "It was just here where I first heard you call out. I was——"

"Hallo! what's that?" cried Kneebone, as a small stone fell in front of them. At the same moment there was a slight movement in the plantation on the other side of the wall.

"Oh, nothing of any account," answered Abel, as he stooped and, picking up a pebble, jerked it lightly into the wood.

The two went forward a few yards, and then Kneebone said abruptly, "Who is she?"

"Who is who?" inquired Abel in a tone of surprise.

"The lady in the wood, your lady-love, I suppose."

"I don't quite catch your meaning, Mr. Kneebone."

"You don't mean to say it is your cousin, Miss Ruth Boden?" said Kneebone, halting and laying his hand on Abel's arm.

"I didn't know I had said it was any one, Mr. Kneebone. If the miller heard my name connected with that of his daughter there would be trouble, I'm afraid—especially now, since things have taken the turn they have, sir."

"Well, well! it has taken me by surprise, I'll admit."

"But I have admitted nothing, Mr. Kneebone," put in Abel, a little defiantly.

"Certainly not. And you will be—— Look here, lad! you have saved my life this night, and I shan't forget it, you may depend. We must be friends, close and true friends—eh, Abel? I may call you Abel, as though you were my own son, mayn't I?"

What was it that sent a sudden rush of emotion over Abel, bringing him in an instant nearer to tears than he had ever been before, except when thinking of his father in some of his pensive moods? Perhaps it was the subtile ring of sympathy in Kneebone's voice and words.

"I have no father, as you know, Mr. Kneebone. And I am thinking none can ever fill his vacant place. But—yes, call me Abel; and we will be true friends. I'm shy at making friends, but—I like you. I can trust you. You shall be my friend," said the young man; and their hands met in the pact of friendship.

"Friends through thick and thin, Abel! On the subject of your lassie, I'm dumb from this moment. Some day, when we know each other better, you will tell me all about it. Now, to go back to what we were talking about, who was the ruffian you recognized?"

"I think I'd rather not tell you just yet, unless you wish it very much. You see, I'm not sure, and it might make trouble," replied Abel, in a hesitating manner.

"No, it shall make no trouble till we are quite sure of our man. Do you think your uncle had a hand in it, Abel?"

"Why do you ask?" inquired Abel, quickly.

"I don't know, I'm sure, unless it is that I know he is sore because I have kept you on. Strange, isn't it, how he hates you?"

"Yes; and cruel as strange. I've given him no reason to, that I know of."

"You are the son of your father. I suppose he thinks that is reason enough. You remember your father, don't you?" said Kneebone, in a low voice.

"Yes, in a confused sort of way. I've only one clear memory of him. I remember him lifting me up on to his shoulder—he was standing on the edge of the quarry on the moor—and I recollect feeling afraid as I looked down. It seemed an awful distance to the bottom. I believe I never saw him again after that."

"Was that the day of the quarrel?"

"Yes; so I am told. I was scarcely five at the time."

"And you have never heard of him since?"

"Never. I don't know whether he is living or dead."

"I guess you would like to hear, though?"

"Like to! I'm not much of a praying man, and maybe I don't bend my knees as oft as would be good for me; but bending or standing, I judge, is much one to our Maker. And God knows that, for the last fifteen years or more not a night has gone but I've prayed that the morrow might bring tidings of my father. I've about lost hope now," said Abel, in a thick voice.

"Nay, lad, keep a stout heart and hope on. I'm not much of a prophet, and don't much believe in prophesying unless I know; but somehow I feel sure you'll get tidings of him some day. You may bet on it, lad, he hasn't forgotten you. You see, if he had sent word to you for a time, and then have dropped it, there would be some ground for thinking he was dead. But unbroken silence, I take it, means that he is still alive and well, and biding his time to turn up. Anyhow, it's a comforting theory, and I'd advise you to hang on to it for some time longer. Never be in a hurry, lad, to believe that Hope is dead. You might as well fret for your own funeral. Will you come in a bit?"

They had reached the Nag's Head by this time, where Kneebone was putting up.

"Not to-night, thank you. How do you feel now?"

"A bit shaken, lad, but nothing serious. A good night's rest will put me all right, you'll see. You didn't answer my question about the miller?"

"I'd rather not, to-night," answered Abel.

"All right; but I'll keep my eye open in future. I'll let him know to-morrow that I've promised the land along the river-side to the squire, and see how he likes that. Good-night!"

"Good-night!" answered Abel; and turning away he retraced his steps to the foot of the lane leading to the mill. He stood against the wall bounding the plantation for some little time, seemingly occupied with his thoughts; then he put his hand to his mouth and sent out a weird *hoolie-gool-oo-oo* that smote with terror every fieldmouse that heard it, and was enough to haunt with fearful dreams the last spell of a frog's long sleep. The echo of the brown owl's cry was still in the air when the wail of a plover came from the plantation, which was answered by Abel with the low boom of a snipe. Then he vaulted the wall, and diving into the plantation like one who knew every inch of the ground, he climbed the hill and came to

a ring of firs about a stone's throw from the rickyard at the mill.

On a jutting rock in the middle of the open space sat Ruth. She had an amber necklace in her hands, and amusing herself with fingering it, seemed to be telling her beads. The wind had risen, and the torn clouds were moving away in two layers—the upper layer slowly and sullenly and the lower swiftly, in many a fantastic vaporous form.

As Abel entered the circle, the moon sailed out of the scowling darkness and threw its clear, pale light upon the girl, who rose to greet her lover.

"Why didn't you wait for me below?" said Abel, as he stood in front of her, holding both her hands.

"It was very foolish of me, I know, but—well, I think I was a bit nervous," answered Ruth, in an apologetic tone.

"That is something new, sweetheart, isn't it? What made you nervous?"

"Oh, never mind it now. You would only laugh at me if I told you. Tell me where you have been and what has happened."

"Not till you have told me what frightened you," persisted Abel.

The girl hesitated awhile, and then she said, "While I was waiting for you to come back, a man came running down the road, and turning up the lane he jumped over the wall into the plantation, and crouched down as if to hide himself. There were only a few bushes between him and me."

"Did he see you?"

"No; I kept perfectly still, wondering what on earth it meant. He did not stir from the place until you went by with—Mr. Kneebone, wasn't it?"

"Yes. What then?"

"After you had turned the corner to cross the bridge he got up and went into the road, and—and—stood and—shook his fist at you," said Ruth, nervously.

But Abel only laughed low, and said, "You kitten! I'm afraid of no man's fist."

"Oh, but dearest, you should have heard him! He cursed you horribly, and swore he would have his revenge if he swung for it. I thought I should have fainted with terror."

"Poor child! If I'd only known, I would soon have been with you. Try and forget all about it," said Abel, with great tenderness, as he drew the trembling girl close to him.

"He will harm you, my love. He swore he would. What have you done to him, Abel?"

"I don't know that I have done anything, unless—— Do you know who it was, Ruth?"

"Don't you know, Abel?"

"Not for certain, but I can give a pretty good guess. Was it Am Ende?"

"Yes, it was Am Ende. He is a dangerous man to have for an enemy. What have you done to anger him, dearest?"

"Well, I haven't done very much as yet—unless it was to prevent him from having a hand in a cowardly murder. I found him and a couple of unknown villains doing their best to kill poor Kneebone. If I hadn't turned up when I did, I make no doubt they would soon have throttled him."

High-spirited and full of mettle, there was no braver girl for miles round than Ruth of Voe; but Abel felt her tremble as she spoke. She saw no more perhaps than he did, but infinitely clearer. Her imagination was more nimble and realistic, and future events that were for him a blurred mass had features cut like cameos for her.

"O Abel, my laddie, it bodes no good, I am thinking, for us! But we will be true to each other, won't we?" she murmured, with a ring in her voice that sent a thrill through her lover.

"Trust me, darling! I have nothing else to live for—now—but your love."

"Nay, nay! don't say that, my love! I know what you are thinking; but you are wrong. He will come back one of these days, and then—then I shall grow jealous of him, father or no father."

"O Ruth, Ruth! but for you I should have gone mad, I think. And sometimes even now I feel as if my heart would break when I——" He paused, and struggled painfully to overcome his emotion; but the effort was useless. And as his feelings swept over him in an irresistible flood, he raised his hands to heaven and sobbed out piteously, "O God, God—Father and Mother God! give me back my father!" His hands fell; his uplifted face, full of sad and melancholy beauty in the brilliant moonlight, drooped earthward; while a sound, half groan and half wail, fell from his lips.

Gently did Ruth draw him to the cropping rock; and thereon seated she took his head upon her bosom, and stroking his face softly, crooned over him as a mother over her troubled child. After awhile Abel sat up, and shaking himself said, "I am ashamed of myself, Ruth, for letting my feelings get the better of me like that. It is bad enough when I'm alone, but before you——"

Ruth put her hand to his mouth and stopped him, saying, "Before me? Am I not your own? Your grief is my grief, and your hope is my hope. You must let me share all your trouble, Abel, if I am to share your joy."

"Ah, lassie," murmured Abel, as he drew her close and kissed her, "you are well named. You take after the sweet woman of old. Think you, was it some one who loved her—a lover or a husband—that wrote the story in the Bible?"

"I never thought of it in that way," answered Ruth, with a soft, love-filled laugh of gladness; "but perhaps it was. It was just like a noble husband to go and do a thing like that. Only in that case I'm afraid he flattered her a bit."

"Happen he did. It's no new taste in women to like sweet things, and no great harm, as I know of, to humor them a bit. See this," said Abel abruptly, pulling out of his pocket a big brass button of a peculiar pattern.

Ruth examined it carefully and said, "I know who wears buttons like this."

"Are you sure?" inquired Abel, seriously.

"Yes. Am Ende does."

CHAPTER VII

IL PENSEROSO

"I GUESSED as much. If I let Kneebone know there will be trouble, Ruth. It's a bad piece of business altogether."

"You don't think father had anything to do with it, do you?" asked Ruth, in a startled tone.

"I'm afraid he had. And what's worse, Kneebone suspects him."

"But why? Why should he suspect father of doing a terrible thing like that?"

"He puts it down to the miller's rage at him keeping me on."

"Yes, father is very crossed about it, I know. I never saw him like he has been the last few weeks. But he wouldn't do anything wicked like that; I am sure he wouldn't, Abel," pleaded Ruth, with a dim uneasy feeling all the time that she was going moral bail for her father to a degree that was only justified by her filial relation.

"I'd rather think with you than not, but the thing has an ugly look about it. Am Ende would hardly dare to do it on his own account, I'm thinking."

"Promise me you won't tell Mr. Kneebone anything about Am Ende! It would kill me, Abel, if father had to go to prison."

"Nay, don't you go and frighten yourself on that score! The miller is no fool, Ruth. He will take care of his own skin, you may be sure. If any one suffers it will be Am Ende; and your father could easily make it right with him."

"O Abel, I don't like to hear you talk like that. You speak as if you were sure of father's guilt," said Ruth—a note of reproach in her voice.

"Whatever I may think, Ruth, be you sure I shall do nothing to injure your father. He has done all he could to injure me, as you know, without cause on my part; and I'm going to take my revenge along the old line of doing good for evil. I cannot forget two things, my sweetheart: in the first place, he is your father; in the second, he is my father's own brother. No, lassie, I can't even bring myself to hate him, let alone to hurt him."

A singular moral creature, it must be confessed, was this young blacksmith-naturalist. Anything but a conventionally religious man, anything but a coward. Brave, indeed, as a lion, only in a quieter and more human way—did not *roar* his bravery, like most lions, human and otherwise, but acted it, with an instinct worthy of a gentleman. Though he would have laughed, in his gentle ironical manner, had any one been foolish enough to dub him gentleman. He believed in the Church more than in the creed of the Church, and showed his respect for the Church by seldom entering it. A bit of a sceptic, too, having caught, as it were, by accident, a passing breath of the spirit of the age; but he took the complaint in no virulent form, but mildly, not to say reverently. It seemed to aromatize his personality with a subtle and sweet odor. In a large and vital sense he managed to embody the curious radical kinship of *skeptikos* and *episkopos*; terms which—he was only a blacksmith, you remember—we dare not English for the life of us. A singular moral creature was this moth-hunting blacksmith, acting like a genuine Christian at times when genuine Christianity was in order, and thinking pagan thoughts six times out of seven!

As Abel declared his inability to hate or harm the miller, Ruth, being a sweetly impulsive creature, threw her arms about her lover's neck and kissed him. It was a rare human reward for a rare human virtue. It made it seem worth while to cultivate unusual virtues, though they are very costly things to grow. Ruth was a tall girl. Abel stood over five feet ten inches in height, and he had to bend his head but very little to receive the reward of virtue.

"You are a dear good fellow, quite too noble for a commonplace girl like me. But I will try and become more worthy of you," murmured Ruth, her heart full of pride in the moral nobility of her lover.

"I am no more noble, sweet one, than you are commonplace. And as for trying to be better than you are—don't! A fine fruit is content to grow naturally, and mellow with time. You will get warped and out of proportion if you take to trying. It is the method of inferior natures, Ruth," said Abel, veiling a serious belief under a tone of lightness.

"Do you think I shall ever mellow into a fine woman?" inquired Ruth, almost shyly, yet with a touch of passionate earnestness.

"Do I? Why, sweetheart, you are already a fine woman, though a young one. All you have to do is to mellow. God grant it may be under a clear sky and a kind sun!"

Whereat the tears came into the girl's eyes, and she said softly, "Dearest, you are as the sun you prayed for me. You give me hope and strength."

Said Abel with a sigh, "I am very glad if it is so. It's curious, though. I should have thought I was the last fellow on earth to give to any one hope and strength—articles I'm mighty short of myself."

They sat for some time in silence, before Ruth said, "What sort of a man is this Mr. Kneebone, Abel?"

"You have seen him, haven't you?"

"Yes; I don't mean in looks, I mean in character. Tell me something about him. Is he an interesting man?"

Abel laughed and said, "Well, yes, he interests me. I don't know him very well as yet, but from the little I know I like him mightily. I don't think he is much of a blacksmith, though."

"Why?"

"He doesn't know how to handle a hammer yet. He says it is because he has been idle so long. But I'm thinking it is because he never learnt how. He seems to have knocked about the world a good deal. Some day I'm going to try and draw him out a bit."

"Is he a very reserved man?"

"Yes; we are much of the same kidney as far as that goes. He's made a pretty place of Rook's Nest, as he calls it. He is going to have quite a library, I believe."

"Oh, won't that be nice! If he has only got some books on birds and moths and beetles and wood animals for you to read, and perhaps a few novels which you could borrow for me."

"Not much chance of that, I'm thinking. Goodness knows what his taste will run to in the reading line! That he should care to read at all, is more than most folk can understand," said Abel, with some contempt in his voice.

He knew only too well himself what it meant for a man to have a taste or pursuit that was not shared by, or familiar to, the good people of Voe. It meant no little abuse and ridicule, or, at the best, a scornful pity that disdained concealment.

"Do they talk much about him now?" asked Ruth, who knew perfectly well that Abel's sympathy would go with any man whose honest eccentricities had brought upon him the sour looks of his neighbors.

"Talk! their tongue's a razor, and they use him as a strop to whet it on. But it's all behind his back now, mind you. He gave them vitriol for their vinegar, and they're afraid of him now."

"Violet Chalk says he is very rich," remarked Ruth.

"I should have thought Violet Chalk was too shrewd a woman to talk nonsense. I don't say he isn't rich. All I say is this: he never told anybody he was rich, I am sure of that; it isn't his style at all. And he is the village blacksmith. Put the two together, and I say it's all nonsense to call him a rich man. He may be, but nobody knows, and the odds are against it."

Ruth had no doubt that Mistress Violet Chalk had been guilty of talking arrant nonsense, since Abel had said so, and said it almost severely. Still, she was kindly disposed to the nonsense—liked it better than the sober sense of her lover. A rich blacksmith would have been a novelty, a delicious anomaly, a living romance, she thought. Fond of pungent flavors was she, and life was apt to be lacking even in the common table-salt of variety. This same sensibility of her moral palate was one of the active causes that had led her to fall in love with the very man her father most hated.

"But he can't be a very poor man, or he wouldn't have thrown away his money as he did at the sale. I heard father say himself that, if he was not a rich man, he was a fool," she said, willing to justify herself in the eyes of her lover.

"That puts him in an awkward box, I'll admit. In that case, we had better hope that Kneebone is—which is it to be? Rich man or fool?" laughed Abel.

"Oh, rich by all means."

"Then, indeed, is he a fool to carry on a blacksmith's forge in Voe. Poor fellow! the argument seems against him whichever way the wind blows. Yet he is no fool; or if he is, fools are scarcer than I had thought."

"Do you think you will get on well together?" asked Ruth.

"Oh, yes, first-rate. He seems inclined to let me have my own way in everything; and I seldom quarrel with a man who will do that."

"It is because he knows you are to be trusted, dear. I am so sorry that he and father are at cross-purposes. I should so like to have known him. I'm sure he is a nice man."

Abel made no reply for a while, but stood in an attitude of thought, leaning against a tree. The moonlight was on his face, and so was Ruth's glance. It was hardly the face of a blacksmith and the son of a shepherd. It was a delicate, smooth, dark-skinned Italian face, of an oval cast, with melancholy gray eyes, a finely wrought nose, and a beautiful mouth and chin. He had a mustache that a guardsman might have envied, for silken texture and wavy length; his head was a

mass of rings and wheels of short black-brown hair. If he could have kept his hands out of sight, he might have strolled along Fitzjohn's Avenue and been taken for a foreign artist. Yet he had not an atom of the artistic faculty in him. He looked a thorough Southerner, subtle, sleek, supple, insinuating. A guitar seemed to become him infinitely better than a smith's hammer. He was one of Nature's cunning mockeries—one of her finished and heartless ironies. On the face of it, there was something akin to stupidity in fashioning such a peg for such a hole. And as if to cap the absurdity, and at the same time puzzle beholders, Nature had deviated from her fixed practice of subordinating the style of character to the physical type. For Abel was neither subtle, nor sleek, nor supple, nor insinuating. His mental man was thoroughly English, and was simple and honest and straightforward enough to have found an adequate expression in a moon face, a ruddy complexion, and mutton-chop whiskers.

Leaning against a fir, with the moonlight on his poetic face, Abel looked the very embodiment of *Il Penseroso*, the Pensive Man, lover of Divine Melancholy, gentle-hearted friend of Sorrow, sweet-voiced acquaintance of Grief. And, to this extent, he was what he looked. To Ruth his face was a grand living picture, rich in strange beauty and romantic suggestion; she was never weary of looking at it. Oddly enough, she had scarcely ever yet seen it save by moonlight, or starlight, or twilight, or by the broken lights of evening. She longed to see it in the open daylight, illuminated by the glorious sun; but so far, their loves were known only to themselves and Ruth's former nurse, Violet Chalk. And so their meetings had been all in secret and under cover of the night. It was singular what a strong desire the girl had to see her lover's face by daylight. Yet it was a face that lost rather than gained by the light of day; its pensive sadness, its dark, colorless beauty, gathered tone and harmony from the dim lights and deep shadows of the night.

Just now Ruth was looking at him, and thinking how much she would like to see that noble face and head bathed in a flood of brilliant light, that would wash away from her mind all sense of dimness and obscurity, and bring her nearer to him than she had ever yet been able to get. Now that the days were lengthening and summer's herald was at hand, they would surely be able to plan a meeting in the sunlight. She would place her lover full in the sunshine, and bid him forget her and think about badgers or beetles or what he liked best, and she would stand close by and study his countenance, and fill her

soul with images of its unusual beauty, its fascination, its pathetic melancholy. From this sweet dream she was recalled by Abel saying:

"Lassie, Mr. Kneebone has made a discovery."

"I hope it is a pleasant one?" she answered, in a far-away tone. She was disinclined to lose sight of her pleasant dream, which already was dissolving like a distant rainbow.

"I hardly know whether it is or not," said Abel, in a tone that effectually banished from the girl's mind, in a second, all thought of the face in the sunshine.

"What is it, dear?" she asked anxiously.

"He has guessed our secret, sweetheart, that is all."

"O Abel, what do you mean?"

"He has guessed that we love each other. Not a bad guess, either, is it?"

"What in the world can we do? If father should find it out now, it would be terrible, Abel. Two months ago it would have been different, but now—O Abel! how did it happen?"

"Don't be frightened. Kneebone knows which way the wind blows. We've pledged our friendship for each other this very night—he says I saved his life, and happen I did. He's the sharpest-witted fellow I've seen for many a day; once on the scent, he went at the game like a shot. I'm not sorry, on the whole. If we should need a friend, I'm thinking he would stand by us like a man."

"There are two know it now. True, I told Violet Chalk myself, but isn't somebody else as likely to guess it as Mr.——"

"Hush, hush!" whispered Abel, quickly, taking Ruth's hand and retreating into the deep shadow of the firs. Crouching low behind some bushes, they listened—Ruth with a palpitating heart.

A heavy footstep was distinctly audible at a short distance from them. It moved forward slowly, its track being marked by the sound of crackling leaves and snapping twigs. Peering into the darkness, Abel presently made out a sight that startled him. It was the figure of a man carrying on his back something that looked fearfully like the body of a dead man.

Instinctively Abel put himself in front of Ruth, while the figure moved out of sight. Then he said: "You had better run in now, darling." Silently they kissed each other, and then lightly and swiftly as a fawn did Ruth tread her way to the rickyard. Something in Abel's voice had struck terror to her heart.

CHAPTER VIII

A MAN'S BURDEN

THE store-room at the mill was a long, narrow apartment on the top story, with heavy rafters overhead, and lighted by a window at each end; sacks of unground corn stood against the walls and covered the floor, leaving only a narrow passage down the centre of the room. On a sack, near the window overlooking the courtyard below, sat Miller Boden on the evening in question. It was dusk when he left the house, stick in hand, saying: "I am going out for an hour or two, Ruth." Ruth thought, as the miller wished her to think, that her father had gone down to Voe on business. He was often out of the house at night—a fact that had proved very favorable, so far, to the two lovers. But to-night, as soon as he was out of the yard, the miller turned back and entered the mill by a side door that had purposely been left unfastened. He left the door loose as he found it, and passed up, first a flight of wooden steps which led into the grinding-room, and then up a sort of flat-runged ladder into the store-room.

A mysterious time-killer is thought. A thousand years would seem as a day to a painless being, neither hungering nor thirsting, who lost all consciousness of self in the deep abyss of thought. He had been there over an hour, yet it seemed but a few swift minutes to the miller, when he heard a light step crossing the courtyard. Putting his face close to the cob-webbed window, the miller looked out. The yard was white with falling snow, and threw out in strong relief the tall, willowy figure of Ruth. The miller watched her pass through the gate and into the lane, then the shadow of the trees hid her from view. He wondered what took her out at that time of night, and in the snow. A new idea struck him suddenly, and he cursed the snow. Presently he drew back from the window, and pushed a rolling shutter in front of it. Then he struck a match, and, lighting a horn-glazed lantern that hung on a wooden peg near the window, he proceeded to arrange some sacks so as to form a kind of chair with seat, arms, and back. In this the miller seated himself, and having discovered the

most comfortable angle for his large body, closed his eyes with a deep sigh. The way in which he settled himself among the sacks plainly indicated that he expected to spend some time in the mill; but his endeavor to make himself comfortable was unsuccessful, however, judging from the restless manner in which he continually kept changing his position. Several times he consulted his great double-cased silver watch, which it seemed to require no little strength to haul up from the depths of his fob-pocket; while at briefer intervals he sat up and listened attentively. Again he would lean back with a sigh, and close his eyes, as if coveting sleep. Yet he was not sleepy; he hated sleep, and dreaded its embrace, suffocating and horrible as the clutch of a great green cobra. Sleep was to him the time of relentless tragedy, wherein the murder that was on his unhappy spirit re-enacted itself over and over again with pitiless force and detail. 'Twas a wonder he had not gone raving mad. How his reason could have kept itself from growing dizzy and sick, and falling headlong from its throne, amid such a long procession of nightly horrors, is a problem we must leave to physicians and metaphysicians.

Crime breeds crime: the miller was feeling this to-night, with a rage whose impotent heart was fear. What had Knee-bone, an utter stranger, to do with the taking off of his brother Abel? Yet the chances were that, even at that moment, Knee-bone himself was a dire illustration of the terrible truth that crime breeds crime. Then, was not he—the miller—a free agent? Precisely; to the same extent and no more than he was on that far-off day in May when, like a second Cain, he slew his brother. Below the will, deep down in the hidden whirlpool of motive, there was still at work the initial movement whose energy had once transmuted itself into fratricide. Would that primal force never wear itself out, never die of exhaustion? Could not its *quality* be changed? Could it not be opposed and annihilated by some other force operative in the secret places of human nature? Opinions differ. Meanwhile, one thing was certain: at core the miller was the same man as he was twenty years earlier—as he was, for the matter of that, fifty or more years before, while yet he drew milk from his mother's breasts. In a dim way the miller was feeling this to-night; and, curiously enough, the realization of this bit of psychological truth translated itself into the physical sensation of a burn. He felt he was burning. The sensation was local; at times it was in his heart, and at times it was in his head—a spot of fire in the middle of his brain.

"This is hell, hell itself!" he gasped, springing to his feet,

and clasping his head with his hands: then he paced to and fro between the sacks of corn. He was right—it was hell. His nature was capable of murder, and he saw the fact as through a glass darkly: there was a time when the fallen seraph himself would have known a new agony at the like vision. And the miller was not even “an archangel a little damaged.” He had only the rotten strength of his humanity to uphold him. Perhaps in that hour he trod nigh to the borders of the dark land of delirium. Presently he stood perfectly still and listened. There was a faint noise below, which quickly grew into a distinct footfall on the steps leading into the grinding-room.

“At last! I must pull myself together, or the rogue will smell a rat,” muttered the miller, half audibly. The process of pulling one’s self together on the spur of the moment is easy only in imagination, if only for the simple reason that not one man in a hundred knows how to go about it. The miller did not know. He shook himself like a big dog, and assuming his habitual expression of genial glumness to an exaggerated degree, he seated himself with a remarkable stiffness, which he meant for dignity, upon one of the upright sacks. As a comedian’s effort to mimic and caricature the miller of Voe, the result would have been as excellent as it certainly was comic. Apparently he realized that something was wrong; for after he had posed for a few seconds he dropped from his position into the previously occupied chair of sacks. He crossed his fat legs with difficulty, pushed his wide-awake hat to the back of his head, and leaning back jauntily, began to whistle softly the familiar tune of “Cheer, boys, cheer.” Never had the miller looked less like himself than at that moment, when he had made a supreme effort to pull himself together.

He had barely given the last pull when the head and face of Am Ende were visible on a line with the floor, coming up the ladder. As Am leaned forward with his chin upon the floor, and peered into the dimly lighted room, the effect was that of a living head upon the floor, without a body. It was not a handsome head either. Hatless as it now was, its red hair might have been formed of minute wires, so stiff, savage, and unkempt did it appear; its face was as sharp as a hatchet; its little red eyes twinkled and gleamed like the eyes of a gnome; its mouth was large, and something in the arrangement of the teeth made it seem ravenous as the mouth of a wolf. It was anything but a comely countenance, and as it lay there on the floor it looked weird, grotesque, horrible. The miller was perfectly familiar with the uncanny visage, and familiarity which is

cruel to beauty is kind to ugliness; nevertheless, a shiver went through the miller. He ceased whistling "Cheer, boys, cheer," and called out: "So you have come at last, have you?"

"I'll et my head if I could mak' out where you was, sir, it's so dim-like. I heard somebody a-whistlin', and I was a-saying to myself: 'Demme, that bain't the miller a-whistlin'.' Never knowed you could whistle afore," answered the head, with a grimace of pain.

"What's the matter with you? Don't stick there, man, grinning like a death's head," exclaimed the miller, with some heat. Whereupon Am Ende ascended the ladder, and came limping toward the miller; his body was long and lean, but had none of the grotesque ugliness that characterized his face and head.

"I'm hurt, miller, badly hurt," he said, with a snuffle.

"Where?"

"Here, in the caulf o' me leg. I've lost no end o' blood," answered Am Ende, feeling the calf of his right leg, which was bound round with an old dark-colored handkerchief.

"How did that happen?"

"Blest if I know to half an hour. I was a-makin' off as hard as I could down hill, when crack went a pistol an' I thought I was done for. I felt a stingin' pain in me leg, and I yelled out enough to scare the dead. I came nigh swoonin' when I got to th' lane end."

"Idiot! Am I to sit here all night while you gabble about what you felt? What's the meaning of it all? What have you done?" roared the miller, with a purple face and hands that twitched with rage.

"I was a-comin' to that, and there's no cause to go and bully me like that, miller. We'd got our man down, and was a-givin' it to him in fine style, when the devil began to fight like a Hindian and roar out 'Murder' like a bull. Gad! at one time I was a-thinkin' he was goin' to knock us all out. The lads thought so, too. It got our blood up, I can tell you, and we just set on again in dead earnest; and his life 'udn't 'a bin worth an old copper in five minutes' time. You see, it was so infernally dark one couldn't mak' out one's hand like. Well, all of a sudden we found out there was another chap in the game. Lord! he was like a spirit. 'I know you all!' he yelled out. Gad! you should 'a seen the lads when they heard that. They thought it was a kind of spook. They made no bones about it, but just went like two scared deer over the wall into the woods. I tell you, I'm badly hurt, miller," concluded Am Ende, with an exclamation of pain as he seated himself on the top of a sack.

For a moment or two the miller clutched and tugged at his collar and neckerchief as though he was choking; then he bounded to his feet, and before Am Ende could realize the situation he found himself on the floor, with the miller on the top of him.

“You damned rogue, why didn’t you kill him? Kill him, I say. Do you know what you’ve gone and done, you born idiot!” gasped the miller, pounding the head of Am Ende as he thought upon the floor, but in reality upon the corner of an overturned sack half full of grain.

“If I’d—killed him—you’d—’a cursed me, but—I’ll do—it yet,” cried Am Ende, getting out the words as best he could, between the poundings of his head upon the sack.

The miller was breathless and passion-spent. “There, there; get up, you wretch! I’m a fool for dealing with a fool,” he said, relaxing his grip upon Am Ende, and rising to his feet.

“I did the best I could. I’ll do better next time, though,” answered Am Ende, with one of his strange oaths.

“I dare say you will, if you get a chance. But you stand more chance of getting twenty years’ penal servitude. Any way, don’t you lift a finger against him again until I bid you; you understand?”

“Yes, I understand. As for going to jail, you won’t let me do that, miller, I know,” remarked Am Ende. His tone of voice was at the most ambiguous only; but the miller was in an uncompromising mood.

With a growl he turned on Am Ende, and said: “And why won’t I?”

Am Ende kept his eyes on the ground, and was silent.

Continued the miller: “Look here; let us have no mistake about it. If you had done the job neatly, I would have stood by you if anything had turned up. But I’ll never stand by a blundering fool. If anything comes of it—and your man has got a scent like a beagle, I’m thinking—you will have to get out of it as you got into it, by the aid of your fat wits.”

“Some folks dunna know when they’ve got a ring in their nose!” snarled Am Ende, with great daring. Instinctively he held himself on the defensive as he spoke, expecting an attack from the infuriated miller.

But the miller only uttered a scornful laugh, and said: “Happen they don’t. And when I carry a ring, it will be for somebody else’s snout. I’m thinking we had better part for good.”

“Nay, miller, dunna say that. I didna mean to be impu-

dent. I ask your pardon, sir, for what I said about the ring. Keep me on, sir, and I'll do your bidding, and no grumbling about it neither," whined Am Ende, meek as a lamb.

"Well, I'll think about it," answered the miller, gruffly. He knew his man, and knew his worth.

"That's like yourself, miller, and much obliged to you I be. You'll try and help me out of this here scrape, sir—won't you?" said Am Ende, in a tone of entreaty.

"Happen I will, though you don't deserve aught better than a taste of the treadmill. Sorry rascals you must have been not to be able to give one man a sound thrashing! You ought to be ashamed to show your face in the light. Get away with you!" cried the miller, in much the same tone as he would have rated his terrier for not facing a pugnacious rat.

"You bain't fair with us, miller. We did thrash him black and blue; and you dunna count the spook," protested Am Ende, reproachfully.

"Nonsense, fellow! you none thrashed him. I told you—didn't I?—to keep cool, lay it on well, and let him know that it was meant to betoken that we should value his absence more than his presence, eh?"

"Them was the orders you gave me, miller, and them was the orders I gave to the lads. And we let him know, too, what it betokened. But—I might as well own up—we didna keep cool enough."

"Cool enough! Didn't I tell you there was to be no—no murder?—nothing but a good beating?" demanded the miller. His blanched face as he spoke the word "murder" struck Am Ende as being very curious.

"Well, who's done any murder, I'd like to know? I judge I'm nearer dead than any one o' them two. I feels queer-like here," said Am Ende, tapping his forehead.

"Well, that remains to be seen. You'll feel funny in the morning, I'm thinking, when you hear you've done for him!"

Am Ende made no answer save with his eyes, which shot a sinister gleam.

"Have you any notion who was the bogey that scared you brave men?" inquired the miller.

Am Ende shook his head decisively as he replied: "Not the sma'est on earth. From his tones he wasna a Voe chap."

Am Ende was a glorious liar, full-hearted, artistic, natural, and who did not hesitate to take both his eyes off truth, and had a fine contempt for the Cretans whose glance was askance. He was lying now.

Said the miller, with a constrained manner: "Are you sure

you would have known if it had been—well, say Kneebone's assistant?"

"Known if it had bin young Boden's voice!"

"It was not, then?"

"I'm dead sure o' that; I'd tak a Bible oath it wasna neither young Abel Boden nor any other Voe chap," said Am Ende, with the utmost solemnity.

He was lying gloriously. He knew only too well that it was Abel Boden, and no one else, who had rescued Kneebone. But he also knew that the truth would be mightily unpleasant for his master to hear, and might be productive of consequences the reverse of agreeable to himself: a better reason for a lie he could not conceive.

"Well, you've need to thank your stars it wasn't him; but you will have to be mighty careful to avoid suspicion. Can you trust the other fellows?"

"Oh, they're all right. It isna the first job of the kind they've done."

"You are sure they have no idea where the money came from?"

"Take me oath on it. I'm a-feeling mighty queer-like, miller. I'm badly hurt," said Am Ende, woefully. And, indeed, the scamp showed signs of giving out; his face was livid, and his lips were turning blue. Not that he was dangerously wounded by any means. He had lost some blood at first, but the bandage had already put a stop to the bleeding. But he was afraid he was mortally wounded; and fear has killed more people than either bullets or disease.

"Let me look at your leg. I reckon you are more scared than hurt," remarked the miller, with a bit of contempt.

Am Ende stretched forth the wounded limb, and the miller bent down to examine it. Suddenly Am Ende cried out:

"Don't! For God's sake dunna touch it! Brandy, brandy!"

The miller sprang up, and, seizing Am Ende by the shoulder, exclaimed: "Get up with you, and walk about!"

"I canna, miller—I canna," groaned the fear-stricken man.

"Nonsense! You'll have to. Come—lean on me, and let us get down into the house," said the miller, who was getting nervous himself.

The prospect of Am Ende dying up there in the store-room frightened him. As he spoke, he put his arms round his companion and raised him on to his feet. With considerable difficulty he got him as far as the head of the ladder, but how to get him down he did not know. If Am Ende had only been a sack of grain, the miller would have put a chain round his neck,

and lowered him by means of a small crane at the other end of the room. But the crane would not work well in the present case.

"Can't you get down the ladder? Come, try," said the miller in a persuasive tone.

For an answer, Am Ende gave a deep groan, and made as if about to sink in a heap upon the floor.

"Good heavens! what am I to do with him?" ejaculated the miller. "Do you think if I got you on my back, you could hold on till I got you to the bottom?" he asked.

"Dunna know. I'll try," murmured Am Ende. So the miller turned round and stooped a little, while Am Ende put his arms round his neck.

"You must hold fast. If you fall you will be killed," remarked the miller. Then he descended the ladder, which creaked ominously under the heavy weight.

The stairs leading down from the grinding-room were broad and strong, and altogether preferable to the shaky ladder they had just descended; but they were at the far end of the room from the ladder. The room was full of obstructions of one kind or another, and was, moreover, as dark as a chimney.

"Look here—I must go up and get the lantern, or we shall break our necks," said the miller, putting up his hands and loosening Am Ende's convulsive grasp.

"Leave me here and fetch the doctor," moaned Am Ende, sinking to the floor.

"Doctor be hanged! It'll get all over the place if a doctor comes fooling round. Aren't you any better?"

"I'm dying, miller, dying. Happen it's as well to own up now."

"What do you mean? Speak, man, before it's too late!"

"Th' spook was young Abel Bo—— dyin'," murmured Am Ende. His voice died away in a faint whisper, and all was silent as death.

For a while the miller forgot all about Am Ende. His mind seemed to reel and stagger under confused images of murder and revenge. Perhaps Am Ende had lied all through, and the battered forms of Kneebone and Abel were lying stark and lifeless on the black hillside, only waiting for the morning light to reveal the deed of darkness. If that was so, sure as fate there was a time of sifting before him. Years ago there had crept out, and mingled as it were with the air men breathed, dark rumors and sinister hints. None would father them, none would even speak them out; but the air was tainted with them. They came to nothing—perhaps they existed only in his imagi-

nation—but they would revive again in an instant, and they would multiply, and maybe they would culminate in a great hoarse shout of “Away with him! Away with him!” Oh, it was horrible! And a groan of agony broke from the miller. Then again he thought of the two smiths not as dead but alive—altogether too much alive. He did not fear Abel’s hate, but Abel’s knowledge. Abel had fingers that could almost talk—fingers wise as a blind man’s. Abel had eyes like a fox, to which the darkness and the light were as one. He had cried out: “I know you all.” Abel was an arithmetician; he could put two and two together, and make no mistake about their sum. So could Kneebone, from all accounts. Abel’s wit would wing Kneebone’s anger, and between them they would draw a bow at a venture, and let fly a shaft that would go home with a crash. Yes, he was going to be sifted as they sift wheat. He would not have minded, but that he felt he would turn out nothing but chaff.

Just here the miller’s thoughts reverted to Am Ende, and he was about to curse him, when something suggested that perhaps the real Am Ende had silently flitted from the mill forever. Straightway the miller made up the ladder with all speed for the lantern. He was back again in a few moments, and as he held the lantern to Am Ende’s face his hands trembled. He started back terrified, and dropping the lantern on the floor, he put his hands to his head, exclaiming: “O God, he’s dead!” He seemed at an utter loss what to do next. He thought he would go away and leave Am Ende lying there till morning, when he could perhaps manage for his foreman to find the body first. Then he thought he would carry the body into the house and send for the doctor; no, he would not take it into the house, but he would go at once and fetch the doctor. With this purpose he actually went as far as the stairs, but he came back again and stood gazing with the fascination of horror upon the prostrate form. Gradually the idea shaped itself in his mind that he would carry the dead man out into the plantation, and leave him there to be discovered when and how fortune might direct. Questionless it savored of heartlessness, of inhumanity, but it was the most prudent course he could think of. It was a nasty thing to handle a dead body. He had done so once before—involuntarily he put his hand to his nether lip and scratched it. But no scratching could ease the sting and burn of that Cain spot. With a feeling of desperation the miller seized the body of Am Ende, shouldered it as he would a sack of flour, and with his deadly load passed down the stairs and out into the plantation.

CHAPTER IX

AT THE HAG STONE

As soon as Ruth was gone, Abel plunged into the denser and darker part of the plantation which covered the steep slope of the hillside, and was of considerable extent. Abel was as much at home in a wood at night as most men, under the same circumstances, are at sea. A polecat had no keener vision, nor a fox a lighter tread. He moved under the trees, between the bushes, and over the innumerable ground-growths and other obstructions, swiftly and noiselessly, as a native woodland animal. His path was circuitous, though he appeared to be making for a definite point. At intervals he halted to listen for an instant, and then he went silently on again. At length he came to a great black rock that stood out from the steep face of the hill, known by the weird name of the Hag Stone. There was something dark and malignant, at the best of times, in the aspect of this solitary mass of grit-stone, towering up thirty feet or more; but in the broken moonlight, and amid the gloom of the pines, it suggested a crouching monster of the prime, grim, and terrible. By climbing the hillside, it was not very difficult to reach the broad flat top of the Hag Stone. It called for nerve rather than muscle. Abel had a fair share of the latter and a rich endowment of the former. His night roamings had been an excellent discipline for his nerves, and had killed out all common squeamishness. And while his melancholy and semi-mystical temperament kept him effectually rooted to the strange, fantastic world of half experiences, his nocturnal habits had delivered him from the vulgar superstitions and illusions that haunt the generality of mankind.

Without any hesitation, Abel made his way on to the top of the rock. He remembered well that, the last time he was there, he found himself face to face with a fox three parts grown. Reynard started up in surprise, snapped his teeth and growled sharply, and looked as if he meant business. Whereupon Abel went down on all-fours, and advancing backward till he came within range, he shot out his left foot with all his might, and sent the astonished fox headlong over the rock. There was no

fox on the Hag Stone to-night, only a thin coating of snow. Taking off his soft hat and using it as a sort of broom, Abel cleared a space of the rock, and cast himself down upon it at full length. He forgot for the nonce that he had on what may be called his court dress, the pick of his wardrobe, and seldom donned save when he was to appear before his queen. He lay for a while motionless, then he raised his head a little above the rock and looked over. He could see the base of the rock, which projected forward at a precipitous angle. There stood the miller apparently wiping the perspiration from his brow, and at his feet lay the lifeless form of Am Ende. Between the branches of a big red-boled pine came a sudden flood of pale radiance, and fell, gray and ghast, upon the figures of the quick and the dead. Abel saw, and no longer doubted. His worst fears were confirmed. Am Ende was dead. Who had slain him—Kneebone or the miller? A great wave of sickness came over Abel, his head swam, he shuddered, and involuntarily he uttered a sound that began like a sigh and ended like a groan. The miller heard it, and without knowing what it was or whence it came, his ruddy face grew ashen and his knees trembled with terror. To him it was no mortal sound, but a supernatural echo of a similar sound that he had heard twenty years ago. Like a fury-haunted creature, he cast one glance at the body of Am Ende, and then turned and fled through the woods.

Abel, whose quick ears could follow the movements of the wee beasties of the field and wood, and knew the characteristic sounds of the small fry of creation, heard nothing of the retreat of the miller, who went through the plantation like an elephant rather than a startled stag. His senses were confused, and his consciousness was numb to every idea save that of a dreadful calamity. It was some time before he realized his position, and rose to his feet. The base of the rock was now shrouded in sevenfold gloom, which Abel tried in vain to pierce with his keen vision. He listened, but could hear nothing. Only in imagination—the mystic light that never was on sea or land—could he see the dead man lying down there, under the shadow of the pines and firs. Gathering himself together, Abel left the Hag Stone and set off for home; but after he had gone some distance he changed his mind, and with his mind his route. In a little while he was at the Nag's Head. He found Kneebone in his little back parlor, comforting himself with tobacco and toddy.

"Why, lad, what's up? You look as white as a sheet," cried Kneebone.

"I feel a bit shaky, I own," answered Abel, as he seated himself.

"Well, just put the kettle on the fire, and we will soon mend that," said Kneebone, getting another glass from the sideboard, and proceeding to mix some toddy. "There, lad," he said, handing it to Abel, "drink that. It has done me a power of good already. I tell you what, I am feeling sore all over me. Every bone in my body seems to have a separate and particular ache all its own. I thought once of sending for the doctor to examine me. Then I thought I wouldn't. I wasn't sure that I wanted the affair to get out; leastways, not yet awhile. I judge I shall be all right in a day or two. I guess one or two of those miserable skunks are feeling pretty sore. May they have never a pipe nor a glass to console them till the next new moon, is all I wish them."

Kneebone spoke slowly, interjecting his sentences between the puffs of his pipe. He was careful to keep his voice up at the end of each remark, which was as much as telling Abel that he was not expected to talk yet. Abel understood the intonation, and kept silent, while Kneebone watched him furtively from under his shaggy brows.

"You are feeling better, lad?" he said, presently.

"I do, and no mistake," answered Abel, whose countenance had recovered its colorless but healthy subcutaneous warmth.

"Will you try a pipe?"

"I don't mind if I do."

"That's right. Now we can defy fate."

The top of Abel's tobacco seemed like a fiery eye that kept opening and shutting at each pull, when Kneebone said:

"Now, if you like, you can tell me what has brought you back here again to-night."

Instantly Abel put his long clay pipe down upon the fender.

"Nay, nay, none of that, lad. The pipe will keep you cool—only mind it doesn't go out. If I had to report at headquarters how the judgment day went off among men, I'm thinking I should ask the great chief to let me report with a pipe between my teeth. If I could do it at all, I could do it then. If ever you are on your mettle, lad, stick to your pipe! It will keep the fire in your heart and the frost in your brain. I've known men to strike a match, globing it with their hands from the wind, and light their pipe, when death stood in front of them. And they never went down. Seems as how the light dazzled the great archer that he could not aim straight."

Kneebone spoke from a very varied and anything but a drawing-room experience. He knew what it was to pass months

alone in the lofty summit valleys of the Sierra Nevada, without seeing a living soul. In the Australian bush and the backwoods of Oregon, he had formed his estimate of the companionship of a pipe, had discovered the almost divine virtue that resides in the fragrant weed. From it he had over and over again extracted companionship, consolation, and courage. He had come to regard it much as an ancient Hindu, half sensualist and half devotee, regarded the sacred soma-plant. And being, like most of his countrymen, the happy possessor of a few personal prejudices, he even went so far as to bracket the man that never smoked with the man that never laughed. Few, and not remarkably blessed, are the people that have no occasion to rejoice that the cultivation of a few roots of prejudice may go hand in hand with the successful culture of virtue and piety.

While Kneebone was talking, Abel resumed his pipe. When his turn came, he said: "Some people, and there are doctors among them, are very down on smoking nowadays."

"No doubt. There's nothing but what is cried down by somebody; but prejudice isn't science, any more than a collection of whims and crotchets is a gospel. As for the doctors, they breed cranks and croakers as many as do the clergy. But there—my saying is this, lad: If smoking agrees with you, and you like it, smoke. If it doesn't suit you, and I reckon you will soon find it out if it doesn't, then don't smoke. The rest is all but leather and prunello. Now let me hear what's up."

"Am Ende is dead," said Abel, with tragic brevity.

"Eh! What do you say?" exclaimed Kneebone, sharply.

Said Abel again: "Am Ende is dead."

"How do you know?" inquired Kneebone, incredulously.

"I have seen him. He's lying at the foot of the Hag Stone."

"Nonsense! You are dreaming. You have been upset, and your nerves are out of gear. What were you doing at the Hag Stone to-night, I should like to know?"

"Nay, I'm none dreaming," said Abel. Then he told Kneebone how it all came about.

Abel had no padding to do, and so his narrative was brief, swift, and powerful. When he had done, Kneebone lay back and laughed. As men weep for joy so they laugh with horror. Kneebone's laugh was terrible. He thought he had slain a man.

"I guess I'd better send for the doctor now," he said abruptly. Abel only stared at him, and said nothing. "If I've got to be tried for murder or manslaughter, it may as well be on record that the rogues first beat me black and blue. Yes, I'm decidedly in need of a doctor. Good God, that I should ever

have done such a thing! Ring the bell, lad." And Kneebone lay back again in his chair and laughed. He thought he had slain a man!

With his hand on the bell-rope, Abel paused and said: "We are not sure that we did the killing."

"We? We? What had you to do with it? I reckon I did the shooting, not you. But I'm not daft, lad; I understand it. A mongrel would have stood off from me now, and have looked after his own skin. You jump into the same boat with me, and are ready to work an oar side by side with me. Lad, before heaven, I would have done the like for you! But you would not let me, I know you wouldn't. Nor am I going to let you. Now, what do you mean by saying that we are not sure that I did the killing?"

Abel let go the rope without pulling it as he answered: "I don't like to say it, I'll own, but there's the miller. What was he doing with the body like that?"

"That's a leaky bucket, lad; won't hold water. Don't you see, the miller didn't want the fellow to be found about the mill, for fear it should connect him with that ruffianly attack on me. The poor scamp was badly hit, it seems, bled to death at the mill, and the miller had to get rid of him. That's my version, and by the same token I'm—ugh! it's horrible, horrible!" And Kneebone hid his face in his hands.

"It looks awfully probable, Mr. Kneebone, I'll admit. It doesn't follow that it's true, though, for all that. Suppose Am Ende reported how things went on the hillside. He knows my voice well enough, and would let the miller know who it was that came to your help. The miller would argue that I recognized Am Ende. Everybody knows that Am Ende is a mere tool in the miller's hands. He would argue that we should put two and two together. Don't you think he would grow mad at the way Am Ende bungled the job? I do. By Jove! if he got an idea that his share in the work was likely to be known, his fury would almost choke him. In his passion he would fell Am Ende as he would an ox. I'm thinking it's more likely the miller did it than yourself, sir."

For a while nothing was said by either of the two men, who sat smoking, with their eyes on the ruddy fire, wherein they saw images of coming trouble and woe.

Said Kneebone presently: "There is something in what you say, but not much, I'm afraid. I should take more stock in it, if I hadn't done the shooting. Come to think of it, it wasn't right of me. He was running away when I did it."

"He got no more than his deserts."

"Yea, lad, he did. I'm in no great hurry to die, but I'd rather have been killed myself than have killed a man. I fired low on purpose, as I thought, not to hurt him badly. I don't think I'll have a doctor now. In the morning I'll go and put myself in the hands of the police."

"I don't think I would. Better wait a bit and see how things shape themselves. My mind isn't at all clear as to the miller yet. But I'm sure of one thing. If you come forward to father the deed, he'll never say you nay, whether he did it or not."

But Kneebone only shook his head, and answered: "I will stick to the programme, lad. There's no good likely to come of delay."

"I shall go with you, then," said Abel, resolutely.

"There is no occasion; and you are better out of it, if you can be kept out."

"All right, but I'm going all the same. I fancy I'd better sleep here to-night."

"Why?"

"Then you won't give me the slip."

"Nay, since you wish it, I won't do that. Go home, and try and get a good rest if you can. Old Nathan would wonder what had become of you."

Said Abel with a smile: "He knows my ways too well for that. I'm out more nights of the year than I'm in. Now I have got your promise, though, I will go home. I've got a bit of work at the smithy I shall want to finish before we go. I'll come early, if you like?"

"There is no need to hurry about it. I'll come up to the smithy after breakfast. The dead never come to life again, do they, lad?"

"No, not round here; nor are the lost ever found; nor do the absent ever return," answered Abel, with a deep sigh. His eyes were on the fire, and Kneebone looked at him for some moments with a strange expression of countenance. He seemed on the point of speaking, but he checked himself, and, like his companion, sighed deeply. A little later, the two shook hands and parted for the night.

Christopher Kneebone spent a bad night. Not his aching limbs kept him awake, but his troubled thoughts. It was daybreak before he fell asleep, but once asleep he slept soundly for some hours. When he awoke, he sprang up and looked at his watch —ten minutes to nine!

"Only fancy, the village blacksmith in bed at nine o'clock in the morning, and this morning of all others!" he said, addressing the reflection of himself in the glass. He felt in

worse bodily condition than ever—stiff-jointed, and sore all over. But if it took him a long time to dress, he made up for it at his breakfast, over which he lingered but a very few minutes. It was a pouring wet morning, and the village seemed deserted. Kneebone met no one between the Nag's Head and the smithy. He found Abel busy at work, and nothing but an ordinary morning's greeting passed between them.

Kneebone seated himself on a bench and watched Abel work. Presently he said: "It's time to be getting ready to start, isn't it?"

"Yewdle Brig?"

"Yes."

"I don't like the idea. It is like putting your head into the lion's mouth. I'm thinking it would be as well to let the lion put it in himself, if he wants it," said Abel, working the large bellows with one hand, and holding a pair of tongs with the other.

"I must go. I couldn't rest with a load like this on my mind."

"I went as far as the Hag Stone this morning to——"

Abel ceased blowing and talking, and turned toward the shoeing shop adjoining where a horse was heard entering. Suddenly a man's voice was heard talking to the horse, that seemed inclined to be restive. Abel put down the tongs, and had just picked up his tool-box when the man left the horse and came and stood in the doorway. It was Am Ende himself! There he stood, with his gleaming gnome-like eyes fixed first on Kneebone and then on Abel, a peculiar smile playing about his mouth, with his hands in his pockets, and his whole bearing one of masterly impudence. What brought him there was briefly this: On recovering from his deep swoon—for swoon it was, and nothing worse—Am Ende to his utter amazement found himself lying at the foot of the Hag Stone. He was terribly weak and half dazed, but he made his way back to the mill, where the miller received him with much the same feeling and much the same welcome as he would a real spook.

Am Ende wanted to know how he came to be left lying "like a dead jackass out in the woods," as he graphically put it. For a while the miller hedged and dodged, but being hard pressed he finally admitted the truth.

"I swear I thought you dead, and what was I to do? It would never do for you to have been found in the mill. I'm nation glad you're alive, man," he said, with an unusual amount of feeling.

With all his faults, Am Ende was not pig-headed. Indeed,

he had a measure of sweet reasonableness in his composition. Hence he made no fuss, but like a wise man accepted the situation, and declared himself satisfied, under the circumstances, with the miller's explanation. That night he slept at the mill. In the morning he felt like staying in bed, but the miller routed him out, saying: "You can come to bed in an hour or two, but you must get up and show yourself. We are not out of the woods yet, you know." Some time later he said: "You'll take the gray mare to the smithy. She wants a hind shoe."

Am Ende stared hard at hearing this, but said nothing. Doubtless the miller knew what he was about. So Am Ende put a halter on the mare and rode her to the smithy. On seeing him, Kneebone sprang to his feet and stared like a wild man, first at Am Ende and then at Abel.

"I've brought th' mare from th' mill, the gray un. She wants a hind shoe puttin' on," said Am Ende, grinning.

"And where have you come from, I should like to know? I thought you were——" Abel checked himself.

"I might ha' bin visitin' Old Nick, and smell o' brimstun, the way you gaze at me," answered Am Ende, boldly.

"I'll have the mare done in an hour," said Abel. Whereupon Am Ende limped away.

The two men watched him down the road, then Kneebone said: "Well, well! And just think what a lot of sentiment I've gone and wasted."

CHAPTER X

A BIT OF INFORMATION

IT was Sunday morning, the first Sunday in April, and seemingly the first day in spring. In a cloudless sky of tenderest blue the sun poured down a rare flood of light and heat, gladdening the eyes and warming the hearts of man and beast. A soft balmy wind came out of the south, rustling the dead leaves, and gently swaying the bare branches that were hastening into bud. All nature was awake and happy, and, but that it was holy Sabbath, the trees stood ready to clap their hands and laugh aloud for joy. The old church of Voe, a barn-like structure dating from the fifteenth century, had been closed for a dozen years; a new church having been built by Squire Saxton at a short distance from the old one, but inside the park, and close to the hall. It was small and pretty, and very modern in its interior coloring and decoration. Its single bell was now tolling in a sepulchral fashion, and up from Voe came a long, straggling line of men, women, and children, obedient to its summons. The nearest way from Voe was along the park drive, and on a Sunday all the gates were thrown open, except such as were necessary to keep in the deer and other park animals; and the villagers generally availed themselves of the privilege of strolling between steep hillsides, whose bases were thickly fringed with laurels and rhododendrons, while the higher slopes were covered with ferns and long, fine grasses, dotted with lichen-marked bowlders, and crowned with large pines. Higher up the drive were avenues of beeches and chestnuts, with high grass-land to the right, and heavily rolling ground, well timbered and bronzed with bracken, stretching far away to the left. Fallow deer, donkeys, and Highland cattle were grouped here and there in artistic disorder, as though they had been educated into the knowledge that their chief duty in life was to make themselves ornamental.

A great incentive to attend church on a fine Sunday morning was the prospect of a stroll through Owlcote Park. Inside the church, the southern transept was devoted entirely to the squire and his household. One-half of the northern transept was oc-

cupied by the choir, while the remaining half consisted of a large pew which, like that of the squire, was dignified with a crimson curtain in front, supported by a brass rod and rings. This curtain was usually put to the purpose for which it was designed; for while the squire's curtain was always drawn aside as far as possible, the opposite curtain was invariably extended so as to completely hide its occupants from the gaze of the body of worshippers in the nave. And, because we generally see a thing in the worst of all possible aspects, this drawing of the curtain seemed like pride or ostentation, while it might very well have been due to sheer modesty, or dislike of prominence during worship, or even intense devotion. Whatever might have been the motive, however, such was the fact. "Gentleman" Phythian's pew was always curtained close as a confessional.

The occupants of the pew, on the above-mentioned morning, were a gentleman and a lady, who, as usual, were the first to enter the church after the clerk had opened the doors; they were also the last to leave the church, as a rule. They were both attired in drab, and about them seemed to cling an air of refined, old-fashioned quaintness that impressed one like a rare and pleasant odor. It was difficult to lay the finger on any one point of singularity, and when this was done, the sole result was disappointment arising from a sense of having, after all, missed the true point. No critical observation or analysis ever seemed to yield the real cause of distinction. Items such as the tint of their costumes, the antique style of the gentleman's necktie, the peculiar draping of a peculiar shawl, the bowed hair over the lady's temples, all doubtless contributed to the general effect, though they were felt to be contemptibly inadequate when considered as the efficient cause. One's soul is, or should be, the chief and dominating fact about one; and a touch of singularity in the soul may very well express itself like a diffused perfume or universal tint. There will be no distinct mark of eccentricity, no definite badge of oddity; but, on the other hand, everything, from style of costume to cast of countenance, will be delicately touched with the peculiar quality of the soul. The result may be exceedingly pleasant, or the opposite. Everything is in degree. And given the right degree, the result is a delicate and delicious quaintness that may very easily be mistaken for a vestige of the manners of a bygone generation.

We are inclined to the opinion that to this category belong some of the sweetest characters on earth, and possibly some also of the sourest. To this category belonged the lady and gentle-

man in the red-curtained pew. In features they were much alike, and conformed a little to the Jewish type; though we believe we are correct in saying that they had not a drop of the grand old Semitic blood in their veins. Husband and wife, were they? No; they were simply sister and brother, by name Janoca and Balthasar Phythian. In the order of sister and brother we insinuate two important facts—to wit, seniority and supremacy. Miss Janoca Phythian had just entered her ninth lustrum, while her brother was, fortunately or unfortunately, only in the middle of his eighth.

Only children, fools, and centenarians are supposed to regret the fewness of their years; nevertheless, when it is allied with the kindred fact of domestic juniority, youthfulness is as apt to assume the form of a thorn in the flesh as of a rose in the button-hole. Janoca Phythian never allowed herself or her brother to forget the thirty months' start she made over Balthasar in the race of life. She had got the start of him, and she kept it; for what was the earthly use of going to the trouble of getting into swaddling-clothes two years and a half before Balthasar if she was not to remain mistress of the situation all through? The idea was so absurd that Mistress Janoca had never for a moment doubted that Balthasar fully appreciated its absurdity. And, to do that humor-loving and gentle-minded gentleman justice, he had never been blind to the absurdity of the idea, as it existed in Janoca's mind. That he thought her thought on the subject is open to question, though it must be admitted he was a most dutiful subject. He never revolted, never conspired, very seldom availed himself even of the constitutional right of petition. The tactics of an obstructionist did not commend themselves to his sense of fairness, nor the methods of an agitator to his sense of dignity. He could have agitated only among himself; and it is an ascertained politico-psychological fact that "agitators" prefer to operate upon the "masses" rather than themselves. They are the impassive batteries that generate and distribute the electric fluid that make such a commotion.

As if to support and lend dignity to the Janocian theory, Nature had subordinated the slight figure of the man, in stature. The difference was but small—perhaps half an inch—but the effect was great. It was like a crown on the head, like a tower on a cathedral. Again, the difference in height was accentuated by the upright and stately carriage of Janoca, as compared with the easier and less erect bearing of Balthasar. The hair of both, a dark brown, was already streaked with silver; both had dark eyes, noses slightly arched, large mouths

full of sweetest humanity, and lovely teeth, and their expression of countenance was appropriate, as a satirical person once said, to a governing woman and a governed man. There was a look of power in the face of Janoca that was only hinted in the face of Balthasar. Both were lovable faces, almost handsome, brimful of intelligence, refined and humane; but somehow the degree of sweetness was with the man, as that of strength was with the woman. Janoca was slender and tall, but not tall enough to allow any margin for her brother to boast on the score of his height above the average. For the rest, they were people of means, and for the last seven years had lived at the old manor-house, known as Carbel Chase, about a couple of miles from the mill, which had been left to them by an uncle. Previous to that they had resided a mile or two beyond Yewdle Brig; so that the Voese had never quite esteemed them lightly as being foreigners. Voë always spoke of Balthasar as "Gentleman" Phythian. It was understood that he had been bred to the law, though he had not practised for many years.

Says Parini, "When I was a young man I used occasionally to return to Bosisio, my native place. Every one there knew that I spent my time in study and writing. The peasants gave me credit for being poet, philosopher, doctor, mathematician, lawyer, theologian, and sufficiently a linguist to know all the languages in the world. . . . But whenever I gave them reason to think my learning was not as extensive as they supposed, I fell vastly in their estimation, and in the end they used to persuade themselves that after all my knowledge was no greater than theirs." Now, if there is anything in language more sure than Grimm's great phonetic law, it is the fact that Bosisio in Italian spells Voë in English. Indeed, it is highly probable that at some remote period of time a colony of Voese settled at Bosisio, and named it after their original dwelling-place. That they were Aryans there can be no doubt, for none but Aryan peasants were ever capable of seeing in a returned native a duodecimo edition of the Almighty. Voë had a superstitious reverence, finely blended with practical contempt, for knowledge that was too deep for it; and this kind of knowledge found its typical expression in the law.

"Gentleman" Phythian was credited, like Parini, with being a master of most branches of knowledge. The idea of his immense learning was stamped upon their imagination like a line of great-primer. He had all legal science: whether canon law, or civil, or commercial, or common, or criminal, or ecclesiastical, or international, or maritime, or martial, or

moral, or Mosaic, or municipal, it mattered not a fig—he had it all snugly packed away and boxed up in that wonderful little cranium of his. That he carried under his hat, like so much dynamite, sufficient knowledge to make or mar one-half the families of England, was an article of faith among the villagers. How they got the idea was something of a mystery. Certainly not from Balthasar, who was one of the most modest of men—modest not in an ethical sense, but an intellectual. It is only in the United States that people lay a stress on ethical modesty as a great masculine virtue. Elsewhere men have sung it in praise of women. Perhaps in the future women will sing it in praise of men. In part, the legend concerning Balthasar was due perhaps to Janoca, who had a habit of saying to any of the people she had dealings with: “Mr. Phythian says so-and-so, and Mr. Phythian knows everything.”

Said in her best manner, the saying was effective. People went away possessed with the idea that the courteous little lawyer was a man worth looking at, knowing all things. Like most clever women, Janoca had a touch of grave contempt for her sex—was as firmly convinced that they were incapable of ruling wisely as that she herself was capable. She was, so far, a stanch believer in the established order of things—wished to perpetuate it, and shrank from violating or weakening the sentiments and prejudices that were its public sanction and safeguard. Her saying, therefore, respecting her brother, may be understood as her method of veiling her supremacy from the vulgar eye. She displayed in public none of the insignia of rule, and cultivated a verbal fiction to conceal a domestic revolution. Logically, omniscience does not imply omnipotence; and between Balthasar being a master of all knowledge and being master in his own house, there was a deep sea instead of dry land.

But the Voese were not given to logic, and were expert in confounding ideas. Janoca's ruse was successful. Gentleman Phythian was popularly accredited with masking an iron hand under a silken glove. Side by side with respect for his erudition went contempt for the little use he made of it. Beneficence entered into nobody's calculation. Folk simply marvelled that he was not maleficent. How it came about it is not our province to inquire, but the popular conception of power was essentially Satanic among the Voese. If they had only his knowledge and power what would they not do? One thing was certain—they would each have a hall, and a park with deer and donkeys and Highland cattle in it, and drive a roan horse, and even stutter like the squire himself. Moreover, they would

turn the squire into a poor quarryman, and teach him to curse the wretched climate and the wet days that either kept him idle or gave him rheumatism; he should live in a dirty cottage, and his lady should have to take in washing. There was fun in this fierce, side-splitting fun, that made Jake and Reuben roar till the tears came. Ah me! Ah me!

“ Yawns the pit of the dragon,
Lit by rays from the blest.”

Little did Balthasar Phythian dream what a star of splendid ray he appeared to some scores of eyes, what a fantastic and fiery world he was the living centre of! How he would have laughed! How he would have joked! How sad-eyed and sick-hearted he would have grown! How he would have sighed, and hid himself from the sight of the little men with which God had “taunted the lofty land!” But his thoughts were pitched to quite a different tune. For though he was high-minded, and selected his thoughts as he did his friends and his wines, nathless did he daily condescend in his sympathies to men of low state. A lover of humanity, a friend of the people, a seer of great truths in small facts, of things lovely in the midst of ugly things, he covered himself with charity as with a garment, and had a pleasant consciousness that he wore the garment with no awkwardness and with some little grace. Blessed is the man whose egotism is of no ranker growth. In a word, we may say of Balthasar Phythian what Coleridge said of a spiritual kinsman of his: “Nothing ever left a stain on that gentle creature’s mind, which looked upon the degraded men and things around him like moonshine on a dunghill, which shines and takes no pollution. All things were shadows to him, except those which moved his affections.”

On this April Sunday morning, which was full of the genius of God, a remarkable phenomenon occurred, which was observed by nearly every one in church. The service was just getting under way when, to everybody’s astonishment, Janoca Phythian deliberately took the exclusive red curtain, drew it aside, and pushed it closely to the end of the rod! She did this with no haste or awkwardness, but with exquisite coolness and propriety, taking three or four graceful steps along the front of the pew the better to accomplish her purpose. Then she stepped back to her rush-bottomed chair beside her brother, adjusted her gold eye-glasses, and went on with the service, as cool as a cucumber. The ghost of a smile was visible about the mouth of Gentleman Phythian, who kept his eyes upon his prayer-book, while he held his eye-glasses three or

four inches from his nose. A strange momentary something—it was more like unto a low, indistinguishable sound, inarticulate and subterranean, than anything else—filled, or seemed to fill, the church. Newspaper reporters would have expressed it thus: (*sensation in church*). Heads turned, eyes met, glances and facial muscles worked like telegraph instruments, and for some seconds the myriad motes in the sunshine seemed to be a dancing series of ?!?!?!?!?! Was Pride going to abdicate and cultivate cabbages, like Diocletian? Had the Phythians been converted? Was Miss Janoca's new bonnet at the bottom of it all? Had it any connection with A Time, Times, and Half a Time? Was the millennium at hand, when the lion and the lamb would gambol together in Owlcote Park?

Curious how thin is the world-crust of reason, and how easily it is broken through. Grim, too, is the reflection that below the wafer of rationality are the seething *magma*, the twin pulps of fiery madness, inclosing the stony heart of central stupidity. Sparks of madness and particles of stupidity would have been seen in great streams and clouds, if one-half the ideas suggested by Janoca's act had been visibly embodied in fire and rock. Half-way through the sermon Janoca bent toward her brother and whispered: "I want you to look at that young—lady sitting at the end of the pew under the tablet."

Balthasar looked, and continued looking, for the object indicated was pleasant to look upon. The young lady contemplated was dressed in a pretty close-fitting costume of a light-brown shade, and wore a dainty little bonnet the exact color of her hair. Her tall, well-developed figure, graceful bearing, and the way in which she carried her head, imparted to her a certain air of distinction. Her countenance, likewise, was refined, and full of character. Without being beautiful, her face held much of the charm of beauty. She was a brunette, and the high color in her cheeks was singularly pure, and made no encroachment upon the delicate whiteness of her lovely throat. Brown were her eyes, and moulded for love and kisses was her mouth. A sweet, lovable creature, built on lines of intelligence affection, and fidelity, and expressly designed by Nature to

"Disappear in blessed wife,
 Servant to a wooden cradle,
 Living in a baby's life."

The sermon was ended, when Janoca whispered, interrogatively: "Well?"

"I have looked at her," answered Balthasar, gravely.

"Do you know who she is?" asked Janoca.

"Yes; Miss Boden, the miller's daughter, isn't she?"

"Yes. I have a bit of information for you."

"Indeed! What is that, pray?" inquired Balthasar, reaching for his hat and stick.

Answered Janoca: "That girl, Balthasar, is your future—wife!"

CHAPTER XI

THE GREAT ADVENTURE

WITH an air of great deliberation Balthasar sat back in his chair, put his broad-brimmed silk hat upon his head, and looking calmly through his glasses at his sister, said: "What did you say, Jano? Well, what is the matter, pray?"

"Balthasar Phythian, are you taking leave of your wits? Don't you know where you are?" inquired Janoca, with a horrified look upon her face.

As she spoke she rose to her feet for the final hymn and, stepping forward, drew the curtain quickly in front of the pew. Then she turned, and bending down to Balthasar, who still kept his seat, she took his hat from his head, saying with an ironical smile about her mouth: "If you look like a Quaker, that is no reason why you should act like one. I will hold it for you till you are out of church."

Balthasar flushed heavily for a moment or two. He looked up at his sister, who was now singing sweetly in front of the red curtain; her eyes were devotionally high, and her hymn-book lay open on the top of his hat, which she held in front of her with both hands. Balthasar stood up. Janoca's nose grew devotional as her eyes, and went up several degrees. Without turning his body in the least, Balthasar's hand went out, and when it came back it held Janoca's hymn-book. A moment later he broke forth into singing. He had a capital voice, and ought to have been fined for not singing regularly in church, whereas he never sang at all. Janoca, hearing the unwonted sound, turned quickly and looked first at her brother, and then at the top of his fine silk hat, and then again at her brother. His nose was at a beautiful pitch, his eyes were on the vaulted ceiling; rapt in devotion, he was singing like a musical saint. Janoca felt inclined to laugh.

It was a long hymn unabridged, and Janoca thought it would never end; and how silly it was to stand there, holding devoutly a man's silk hat in her hands! At the last verse but one, she leaned over a little and said: "Would you like your hat?"

Answered Balthasar: "Would you like your hymn-book?"

Then they faced each other and stood for a moment or two, both holding at once to hat and book. "One, two, three!" murmured Janoca, and the one let go the hat and the other the book.

Balthasar sat down hat in hand, and Janoca joined in with the singing of the last verse. So ended the first scene of the first act of the Phythian Comedy of Courtship.

The Phythians, for some unknown but doubtless perfectly sound reason, dined early on Sundays. And it was toward the close of the great ceremony, when dessert was on the table, and the butler had withdrawn, and Balthasar had just begun to avail himself of the Sabbatic privilege of smoking a cigar in the dining-room, when Janoca next referred to the startling "bit of information" which she had communicated to her brother in church.

"Are you not glad that it is settled, Balthasar?" she inquired, suddenly.

Balthasar had pushed his chair a little from the table and was leaning back, with his eyes closed, and his feet stretched out in front of a seasonable fire.

"Yes," he answered, sweetly, "very. What do you refer to, though?"

"Whom you are to marry, of course. It was an inspiration, Balthasar—nothing less than an inspiration."

"I thought the days of inspiration were over, Jano?" murmured Balthasar, softly. He thought the flavor of his cigar unusually good.

"For men, certainly; but not for women," answered Janoca, with beautiful intonation of voice, and a stately bend of her wise head. Balthasar laughed mellowly.

"I do not wish you to waste any time over it. And do not fiddle-faddle in your wooing. I have done my part, and now you do yours," continued Janoca, with no little decision in her tone.

"You have lost no time in providing me with a lady to wed, I'll admit. When I threw up the job as a hopeless affair, I gave you a calendar month to do it in. You have not been a fortnight over it. I admire your energy, Jano, though it makes for my destruction," said Balthasar, speaking very leisurely. Like his sister, he had a beautiful voice, and used it beautifully.

"Yes; I have been about as many days as you have been years, with this difference, that I have done something, while you never did anything," answered Janoca.

"Ah, yes! 'Where angels fear to tread' ought to be, one

would think, a sparsely populated locality. But it isn't, Jano. The poet, who ought to know—for he evidently visited that region—himself says it, that the inhabitants thereof are many. Jano, I am given to thinking, dear, that the wise man might well slip the hare and sidle up to the tortoise, when he is on his way to pick out the one girl of all the girls in creation that is to be his wife," said Balthasar, with an air of grave philosophy.

Janoca looked at him less severely. Then she smiled—she looked wondrously sweet, when she smiled—and said, "I do not care to see wisdom used as a mask to hide the face of folly, brother. You speak your wittiest when you are thinking your weakest. I said, if you could not find a wife for yourself I would find one for you."

"I was looking among the stars for my angel. You had the advantage of me there, Jano. You looked in the mill, the village mill, and there you found her. Are you sure her angelic whiteness is not—flour-dust?"

Sarcasm is derived from *sarkazō*, a dog-like rending of the flesh. But everything depends upon the dog. There is the big-mouthed, iron-jawed brute, that rends like a hyena. And there is the gracefully lumbering puppy, as large as a sheep, as docile as a calf, as wise as an old crow; and his teeth are as so many needles. He playfully brings them together with your finger between, and you—squeak. Janoca made no audible noise, but mentally she squeaked. Balthasar's words had a tooth-like sharpness. It was she who had always been the one to dwell upon the quality of the Phythian descent. It was she who never wearied of reminding Balthasar that it was part of his religious duty to marry none but a lady of fair degree.

"I thought you always said that it did not matter who she was, or what she was, so long as she was the one you cared for?" said Janoca, lamely, and conscious of her lameness.

"Have I said that the lady of the mill is the one I care for? She is your choice, not mine. I shall want her to shake her dress every time before I go near to her."

He would like to have laughed out, for it was not often that he could get Janoca into a corner. But laughter would have spoiled the fun; so he kept his face grave and his tongue filed.

"I would as soon she had the dust of a flour-mill upon her as the dust of a coal-mine, brother, or the smell of beer upon her."

"And I would rather she had neither. The proper tang, Jano, is a smack of the soil. It is pleasant as the odor of this

cigar. You were thinking of Lord Lyntaille and Miss Charbon-de-Bois when you spoke of coal, I suppose? Ah, if I were only a lord, I would marry a mustard manufactory, I would espouse a lead-mine! But as plain Balthasar Phythian, I shrink from even a flour-mill."

"No, it is not that, Balthasar. What you are afraid of is—a wife! If the ceremony were all, and you could leave your bride honorably at the church-door and never put eyes upon her again, there would be no difficulty in getting you to marry," said Janoca, in accents of reproach.

"That was a shrewd saying, Thou resemblest the spirit whom thou comprehend'st. I opine, Jano, that we are both a bit loath to pass matrimonially *sub jugum*—that is to say, under the yoke."

"You know nothing at all about it. I have never yet seen the man I should care to call husband; though more than one, as you know, brother, would have been glad to call me wife," answered Janoca, with a grave inclination of her head, while a soft blush of modesty overspread her handsome face.

Seeing her just then, it was a distinct pleasure to know that, if she was still maiden, the fact was not due to that proverbial masculine obtuseness whereby, of women, the worse is so often taken and the better left.

"I know it, Jano. And being selfish I have rejoiced that the race of men was so imperfect in your eyes. Jano, when I see a woman just like you I will marry her at once."

"You will? No, sir, you will not. She would not have you."

"Don't you think I should make an excellent husband, then?"

"Not for the *alter ego* of Janoca Phythian, sir. But for the woman you are going to have, you will make an excellent husband—a trifle odd, a bit sentimental; a shade too amiable, too philosophical, too learned; but still, on the whole, an excellent husband. Wayward, but kind; dappled with conceit as all men are, but veined with sympathy as but few men are; fond of ideas, but not averse from action. A man whose nature is stocked full of the seeds whence spring the flower-like virtues that make a lovely mystery and charm of character. Only, in this particular man the seeds have not sprung yet. Yes, I think I could recommend you, brother, as a husband. You are at least a green twig and full of sap, while most men are without sap and are as brown branches," said Janoca, with great sobriety and equal candor, and an intonation as melodious and perfect as that of a mountain brook.

Balthasar laughed and said, "You had better write that out, Jano, in your neatest hand, and sign it. I will carry it in my pocket when I go a-wooing. If my wits should not sit close about me, and I should ever find myself hard up for something to say, I could pull it out and give it her to read. But seriously, though revenge may be sweet and pious and good to sleep upon, is it one's duty to damage one's self more than the enemy?"

"Yes. If you were dead I would find a husband in less than a month, rather than Philip Phythian should ever have a penny of our money," answered Janoca. There was as little love in her mouth and eyes as in her words.

"Ah me! who were the happy people who used to lie down and die at pleasure? I could wish that the pleasant art was known to Englishmen. Jano, count me as one dead. I shall not object, not in the least. From this day forward let me be nothing but an animated corpse in your eyes. I will announce myself to the world as defunct if you will only do the marrying and the bringing forth of the child whose existence, like a fierce sun, shall dry up the stream of Philip Phythian's hopes. It is really your place to attend to such business, rather than mine."

"No, you are not dead yet. Did I not say you were a green twig?"

"A breath only, Jano. It is not yet written down and signed. And if it were I would empty the inkpot on the phrase. I refuse to be a green twig any longer. I prefer to be a sort of withered fig-tree."

"When your cigar is finished we will go."

"Go? Where?"

"To see the father of the—the lady of the mill, and get his consent. Nothing like striking while the iron is hot," said Janoca, who thought that the debate had lasted long enough and the time had arrived for the *clôture*.

Balthasar, the minority, thought otherwise. Said he, "You are right there. The iron should be hot when one strikes. But the iron is not hot, not even warm. It is cold, Jano, cold as a block of ice. We must do no striking to-day; besides, it is Sunday. You wouldn't surely have a man go hammering on the anvil of courtship on a Sunday?"

"The better the day the better the deed. The getting of a wife is as important a piece of business as the getting of an unfortunate one out of a pit."

"Only in this case, unhappily, it is the other way about. You would set the unfortunate one to dig his own pit," sighed Balthasar, who showed no inclination to hurry over his cigar.

"Well, brother, if I cannot cure your perversity of spirit, I must do my best to regulate your conduct. I am going to put my things on," said Janoca, rising.

Balthasar looked at her, almost startled. "It is madness!" he exclaimed; "the girl is already engaged."

It was Janoca's turn now to be startled. But she did not show it. Her clasped hands tightened a little, and her mouth, instead of opening, grew firm. And that was all the outward expression there was of the sharp spasm of disappointment that smote her like sudden pain. Her voice was under beautiful control as she said, "That is unexpected news. Is it true, Balthasar?"

Balthasar looked at her for some moments in silence. He had a terrible habit of truthfulness, and he was realizing its inconvenience. Should he tell a lie just for once? Possibly his moral palate would be all the better for a touch of bitter tonic. Possibly the world at large was wiser than he had given it credit for, and had discovered the medicinal virtue of a good round lie. Possibly when the Psalmist, in his haste to tell the truth for once, sang that all men were liars, he was saying little more than that cats love mint, and gastronomes olives. But Balthasar, being healthy, was a creature of prejudices; and almost against his conscience, which seemed to desire alliance with his judgment, he decided to stick to the truth.

"I cannot say for a fact that it is so, but a girl like that is sure to be engaged; she is the pick of the place."

"Ha! I thought I should have been sure to hear of it if it really were so. You will find she is free, brother. I shall not be longer than a few minutes," said Janoca, passing from the room.

Balthasar sat listening until the soft footfall of his sister upon the stairs died away; then he sighed deeply, and threw the stump of his cigar into the fire. Most of us know what it is to sit waiting, expecting the door every moment to open and the dentist to say, with a bland smile, "Now, sir, I am ready, if you will step this way, please." Balthasar was in a very similar state of mind. He had no definite thought in his mind, only a number of inconsequent ideas—broken, fragmentary, and rough-edged—filling him with sharp pains. While over all was a sense of the impending operation. Was he dreaming, or was he, on this bright and peaceful Sunday afternoon, actually going to put his hand to the matrimonial plough? The thing was so sudden, so unthought of, so absurd! He lay back in his chair and laughed outright at the waking dream.

Then the door opened, and Janoca said mellifluously, "I am ready, brother!"

Balthasar sprang to his feet as if shot, and answered, "So am I."

It was a brave word, and was bravely spoken; so much so that Janoca marvelled greatly, and gave her brother a searching glance. He smiled placidly, and merely said, thinking of the dentist, "Well, I suppose it will soon be over."

"Indeed, I hope not. You are not going to have a tooth drawn, you know."

Odd that she should have hit upon the very idea that was in his mind, thought Balthasar. He looked at Janoca and laughed. Then, without another word, they went forth upon their Great Adventure.

CHAPTER XII

DEM MUTHIGEN HILFT GOTT

IN Peakshire, the home of the beautiful, beauty is nowhere more at home than in the region round about Voe. And Voe itself had nothing prettier to show than the walk between the Chase and the mill. The highway from Voe to Yewdle Brig ran quite close to the back of the Chase, but the house was completely hidden from view by a lofty wall, green with lichen, and in summer dotted with the pink and blue and purple faces of the tiniest of the flowery tribes. Great chestnut-trees threw their branches over the wall.

Janoca and Balthasar went, not along the highway, but through their small park and the plantation beyond. They followed a mere grassy trail, that wound here and there and up and down, as if its sole purpose had been to take in every fine point of observation and every rich patch of beauty; clumps of timber; sweet-voiced brooks; hollows full of bracken and rabbits; dingles where the snowdrops grew, and the primroses, and the wild roses, and the blackberry-bushes; slopes where centuries of rains had done their denuding work, and the dark rocks showed their stern faces, with sometimes their naked heads and shoulders; here the lone, tall elm, home of the solitary crow, and there the low, broad holly, from whose top the blackbird whistled; lowland meadows where fat cattle lay blinking in the sunshine; and ploughed uplands, whence one could see valley after valley, and hill upon hill; and wild moorlands lying close against the sky, and looking like short cuts to the kingdom of heaven. There followed a short steep descent through a wood, and then Janoca and Balthasar stood upon the highway, a few hundred yards above the mill.

Not a word had been spoken by either the whole way. Janoca had kept her eyes open all the time, and had never, she thought, enjoyed the walk more. But Balthasar had seen nothing but the ground in front of him, and some of the protruding stones that formed steps over the walls they had crossed—together with some stepping-stones across a couple of brooks, and a

slender foot-bridge with a broken hand-rail, which spanned a brawling stream, which, he always thought, ran as if it fancied the Scarthin could not get along without it.

Balthasar had been less occupied with his thoughts than with his sensations. He was immersed in a dreamy element of unreality. Oddly enough, however, the moment he stood upon the common turnpike road, this medium of unreality vanished like a morning mist, and the outlines of things seemed strangely clear and hard.

"Jano, what is it you wish me to do? We are nearly there," he said, with the air of a man just awakened from sleep.

"You must get Mr. Boden's consent, of course," answered Janoca, smiling.

"Then that is all, is it?"

"No, not quite. The next thing is to get the lady of the mill to consent."

"To-day?"

"Yes, if possible."

"Ah! then you had better go on alone, and let them know I am coming next week, or—next year. I am going home," said Balthasar, turning round as he spoke.

Janoca's dark eyes opened wide with astonishment. "I do not understand you," she said, quietly. And in truth she did not. She did not know that her pliant subject had the making of a rebel in him. But he had, and just now he showed it.

"Issachar, being an ass, crouched between two burdens. I don't mind being a green twig, or even an animated corpse, but I draw the line at an ass. I do not feel that it is in my line, quite."

"If you will speak plain English, brother, my dull wits will perhaps be equal to your meaning." This with a stately gravity of tone and manner.

"Well, I mean this: I will attempt the lady or the gentleman to-day, whichever you say, but not both in one day. To stand such burdens I had need be a great oak, not a green twig."

Janoca not infrequently had her suspicions that Balthasar surreptitiously dealt in gentle irony and innocent malice. She would have been grieved had she been sure about it; but she was not sure. Indeed, she secretly flattered herself that she alone was conscious of the saline quality that oftentimes showed itself in her brother's speech. Thus the occasion of a wound was transformed into the pleasant tingling of self-complacency. And now, as he dropped that phrase, a green twig, she felt as though a pin had pricked her. She gave Balthasar a quick glance, but his face, as usual, gave no clew to his meaning.

"I have no desire to overweight you, Balthasar. I am anxious only to save time. But, after all, it is your affair, not mine; and you must choose your own method of accomplishing it. Suppose you try the miller to-day, and leave the other until to-morrow?" she said, as they went on.

"Week. I shall need a clear seven days' rest to recuperate. Well, it is a bargain. I try the miller only to-day. If they are both present you will take the lady in tow. If only the lady is to be seen I do no work on the Sabbath day. I wish her good-day and retire. Nay, I will hear no objection. To-day it is the miller, and the miller only. Hallo! if she isn't there by the door!" exclaimed Balthasar, as they rounded the rick-yard and faced the house.

"And a very pretty, genteel figure she makes," observed Janoca, quickening her pace as if she thought there was some danger of Balthasar suddenly retreating.

Ruth came forward to meet them, her color a little heightened by surprise.

"You know us, my dear, of course. I am Janoca Phythian, and this is my brother," said Janoca, putting on her sweetest smile.

"Oh, yes, I know you very well. I have often seen you at church," answered Ruth, taking Janoca's proffered hand. Then her eyes rested upon the face of "Gentleman" Phythian, the little monster of legal lore who veiled his despotic temperament with the most engaging urbanity. Years ago, as a child, she had dreamed about him; and in her dreams he had mingled, not incongruously, with the figures of Bluebeard and Red Ridinghood's ironical wolf. And though the mantle of mystery which her young imagination had woven for him had long since been, not worn out so much as folded up and put away, with many other strange and fond costumes and trappings, into some dim attic of memory, Balthasar Phythian had not yet taken rank among ordinary men in her eyes. The touch of her imagination was still upon him, and in virtue thereof he was not as other men. Never before had she been so close to him or looked into his eyes. She looked at him so intently that Balthasar wondered if she could read her destiny in his eyes. He raised his hat and made her one of his best bows—and not a dozen men in England knew the art and mystery of a bow better than he did. Then Ruth dropped her eyes, embarrassed, greatly startled, at her own fearlessness. Would he think her bold? The color burned hot in her cheeks. Balthasar saw and understood, and was glad, though he was sorry for her.

Said Janoca, who also had the art of divination, "My brother would like to see your father for awhile. Is he within?"

"Yes. Will you come forward, please?" said Ruth. She was for sending them round through the garden to the front door, while she went in through the kitchen to open it.

But Janoca said, "If your kitchen, my dear, is as sweet and fresh as mine, it is fit for a duchess to enter. We will go with you."

"I have only Jane to help me, Miss Phythian, while you have three or four servants," said Ruth.

"That is true; but the Chase is a large house, and this is a small one. Are you the fine lady, my dear; or do you help Jane at all with the work?"

"Jane does the heavy work, and what I may call the dirty work. But that leaves me plenty to do, Miss Phythian," answered Ruth.

Balthasar, watching her closely, saw the color rise faintly, and a beautiful dignity in the carriage of her head develop itself in a flash.

"I am glad to hear it. It is the only way in which a woman, be she high or low, can become a good housewife. And, my dear, let me tell you a secret—good housewifery can do more for the world than all the theology and the politics in creation. Marry a revolutionist to a first-rate housewife, and he will become transformed into the image of a sleek optimist. At the bottom of all hardness of heart, fanaticism, insanity, privy conspiracy, and rebellion is—bad housewifery."

Janoca never lectured or declaimed, much less ranted. She uncoiled her womanly doctrine as naturally and nimbly as a spider its web. Ruth liked the doctrine well; somehow it left the taste of honey in her mouth. She liked, also, the voice in which it was uttered—so soft, so cultivated, so full of what sounded like the melody, the incommunicable and inimitable melody, of the soul unseen. She looked at Balthasar to see how he took it; and with a smile visible in his eyes only, he said:

"You know, Miss Boden, we all admire most our own peculiar excellence. If we didn't, we should have very little excuse for being so narrow in sympathy and so lop-sided in virtue."

"Thank you, brother, for your left-handed compliment. I would rather distribute my excellence over my whole being, I grant you, and wear it—as some gentlemen do their vices—like a skin. But failing that, I will, if need be, carry my excellence as Mr. Punch carries his hump. Who, I should like to know, would now care to see Mr. Punch with a straight back?"

"Turn the gentleman to the wall, and he would make a first rate hat-stand. By your leave, Jano, men shall not turn my virtues into pegs on which to hang their greasy caps."

"And by your leave, brother, that is about all that our best virtues are fit for."

"Ah! well, when you grow humble, it ill becomes me to wax proud. The green twig has now become a hat-stand! Miss Boden, are you in need of such a piece of furniture? It will be sold cheaply, I assure you," said Balthasar, with comical gravity.

"I am not fond of second-hand furniture, sir," answered Ruth, laughing at her own daring.

"Very well said, my dear, very well said. Brother, that was a light shaft, but well sped. Confess it, now," said Janoca.

"My self-esteem has had one of its two eyes put out. If she would dub me old and rickety, I should be led home dark—dark, but happy, Jano," replied Balthasar, with a meaning that lurked not in his words, but in his tone.

Janoca understood him perfectly. "I think we had better go in," she said, taking Ruth's hand in her own. They went in, followed by—the piece of second-hand furniture. The kitchen was fleckless; so also was the large, old living-room, with its massive oak beams overhead and great open fire-place. A study in the antique was this room, thought Balthasar, and much he would have liked to spend some time in it. But the womenfolk passed through it without stopping, and so came to the best room of the house, into which Balthasar followed them. This was a modern room, and well furnished and, thought Balthasar, utterly commonplace and contemptible beside the piece of quaint antiquity adjoining. There he had caught sight of a lovely old spinning-wheel standing in the corner by the black oak clock-case. Here his eyes rested upon a smart piano of newest make. Spinster *versus* pianist. Balthasar's sympathy and preference inclined toward the elder figure. The image was richer in every tone of true worth. Yet she, the living pianist, was not wanting in tokens of true worth. Somehow she seemed full worthy even to sit at the wheel and work the work of the good women of old time. So thought Balthasar, as he stood back and held open the door for her to pass out. She smiled, and bowed her thanks with lovely grace and almost queenly graciousness.

"A miller's daughter and a piano-player! She ought to be a young countess. Young Abel Boden, the blacksmith, you know, looks like an inspired Italian artist, I often think. And here is another piece of irony incarnate. A girl who

ought to be a showy, shallow, piano-strumming hoyden has the grace of a Penelope and the sense of a—a—a—Ah! I don't think any woman was ever famous for sense, was she, Jano?"

"I am glad you think so well of her," remarked Janoca, ignoring her brother's banter. Then she added sapiently, "You may be inclined to think she is perfection now. It is the way with you impulsive men. But, take my word for it, she is not anything of the kind. If she were, she would be too good——"

"For you to care for her as a sister-in-law, eh?" interpolated Balthasar.

"Yes, if you like it better so. I am your sister, you know. I do not believe in your perfect women. There is no salt to them. As pieces of imagination they are inferior even to angels. And only a third-rate poet would now dabble with angels."

"I think women are, as you say, inferior to angels in one respect—they marry and are given in marriage. In that respect I think the angelic custom is the better. O Jano, Jano! do you realize what you have brought me here to do?"

"I would rather ask, brother, do you realize what you have to do?"

"No, thank heaven, I don't quite! If I did I should feel like a cipher with the rim knocked off."

"Tut! tut! do not be a coward! *Dem Muthigen hilft Gott!*"

"Cold comfort, that, Jano! *Der muthige Mann* can help himself, while such as I need a battalion of angels at their back. I think we had better order a couple of sacks of flour and get away home again."

"We don't usually buy flour on Sunday. If our father had been like his son, I fear our mother would have died a spinster."

"I wish to goodness he had married somebody else; and then, whoever I might have been, I should not have been myself."

"What in the world will you say next? Before I forget, brother, do not forget to remind Mr. Boden that it is a Phythian—a Phythian of Cottersley—who seeks the hand of his daughter in marriage."

"Why, certainly. He knows I am Balthasar Phythian, without me telling him."

"You know what I mean, brother. With people like him, blood——"

Just then the door opened and the miller came in, with a face like the rising sun. He was a shy and awkward man with his betters, and especially in the presence of ladies. He stood

now like a bashful boy "of huggy bulk," and said, "Good-day to you, ma'am, and to you, sir."

"My father-in-law!" mentally ejaculated Balthasar. "Glad Penelope is not by. He would shame her."

Meanwhile Janoca, with the deft art of which she was an accomplished mistress, was bringing back the truant self-possession of the miller, and setting his wits upon their feet again. A few words, a few tones, a few muscular movements, a few strange passes of the soul, and the subtle work was done. How it was done was a secret hidden in the deepest recesses of her spiritual organization. When she was so minded, Janoca, being a woman, had an infinite capacity for irritating. But her normal influence was soothing; and when her will became engaged she could work upon one's spirit like soft rain upon the heaving waters.

For some minutes the talking was monopolized by Janoca, while Balthasar dreamed and the miller sat listening, assenting, and inwardly wondering what it all meant, and how it came about that some folk seemed to be born with their insides full of words, while others had to catch them flying, as bats belated moths. Presently Ruth came into the room, whereupon Janoca rose and said:

"Come and show me your quaint old garden, my dear. I want to have a talk with you." And together they left the room.

Now was Balthasar's hour upon him. He came out of his dream and fixed his glance steadily upon the miller in silence. The miller bore it bravely for a time, then he got restless.

"It's mighty strange what talking machines some folks be," he said finally, with an effort.

"You are thinking of my sister? I tell her sometimes that she has the words and I have the ideas; and if we could exchange half of our stock-in-trade it would be a great advantage."

"Nay, but she's a powerful pretty talker. I could have sat an hour longer listening to her sweet voice."

"You are a widower, are you not?" asked Balthasar suddenly, as the thought struck him—why should not the miller marry Janoca?

"Yes, sir, many a long year. But I don't say I wouldn't marry again, if the right woman came along."

"Dear me! But I suppose one can get accustomed to anything. Now I am a bachelor, as you know, Mr. Boden; and could you, with your experience of matrimony, recommend me to try it?"

The miller broke out into a hearty laugh—a rare thing with him nowadays.

“Happen I could, sir. It’s good for the temper, anyway. It tries it,” he answered, laconically.

“The quality of my temper I know; it has been tried so often. What else is matrimony good for?”

“Good for the purse. It empties it, and so saves it from wearing out so soon, eh?”

“I understand. Proceed, please.”

“To cap all, it’s good for life, sir. It shortens it,” said the miller, with a touch of grim humor.

“Three most excellent points. You have a daughter, Penelope?”

“It is Ruth you mean, sir.”

“You know her as Ruth. To me she is Penelope. She needs a husband. A girl should always marry young—and such a girl! I need a wife. Strictly speaking it is not a wife I need, but a child, an heir. And our social arrangements are so clumsy that I cannot get the rose without the thorn. I must have the flower, and hence the necessity of getting a fit and proper tree to bear it. Should you have any objection, Mr. Boden, to me paying my addresses to your daughter, Miss Penelope?”

If the slender gentleman in front of him had been suddenly transformed into a faun with pointed ears and goatish hoofs the miller could hardly have been more astonished than he was at his words. He brought his hands down upon his knees with a slap, and stared at Balthasar incredulously. “Happen I don’t understand you aright, sir. Be it that you want to court my Ruth?” he said, as though he could not believe his own ears.

“Yes; in the vernacular, that is my meaning.”

“Well, well, well! That beats anything I ever heard of! It’s nation strange, sir.”

“What is strange?”

“That a gentleman of your quality should take a liking to my Ruth. Not but what she’s a proper girl enough—clean and handy, and—and a bit of the lady in her. But you’re a Phythian, sir.”

“Yes, Balthasar Phythian is my name. And I suppose there has been a Balthasar Phythian in direct line now for—well, I think we generally prefer to start with the reign of Henry VIII. In that reign—which was a goodly time for a shrewd man employed in his Majesty’s service—my ancestor, by kingly favor, carved out for himself a snug estate from the confiscated

abbey lands of Cottersley. His father, I believe, was also Balthasar. But he was a rusty, dusty, devil-driven old scrivener; and I do not suppose the thoroughbred Phythians of Cottersley would have recognized him for an instant, if it had not been necessary to find a father for his son. In all of which matters my sister is well posted; and she will entertain you by the hour, if ever you have any time to waste. For myself, Mr. Boden, I am more interested in hearing your answer to my question." For awhile the miller sat thinking, ever and anon breaking the silence with a "Well, well, well!" or a "Who'd have thought it?" or a "Beats anything I ever heard." Balthasar, finding the time to drag, fell a-dreaming.

"Might I make bold to ask, do you love Ruth, sir?"

Balthasar opened his eyes and looked up, and said quickly, "Oh, dear, no! Not in the least. Hei! how very thoughtless of me! Yet the truth is the truth. And, after all, it does not matter much. A man must love his wife, of course. That is the anodyne of matrimony. But I do not know that it is anywhere written that a man must love his—his—in the vernacular—sweetheart. I can see that there is no objection to his doing so, but it is not by commandment. Now Miss Penelope is not even my—sweetheart. And I submit, Mr. Boden, that neither law nor gospel contains a hint that a man, a virtuous man, should love a charming girl who is neither sweetheart nor wife."

"Well, that's a queer notion, and no mistake. Happen there's sense in it, though, when you get o' th' inside. But it's a nut, sir, and must be cracked before you get at the meat. You wouldn't ask to marry her without loving her a bit, sir, would you?"

"I am sure I don't know. On the spur of the moment, however, I think I may say that I would. But it is a matter on which I should be entirely guided by Jano. Jano is my sister, you know."

At this the miller looked grave and shook his head. "Where there's love on both sides marriage isn't all cakes and ale, sir; and without it, the Lord only knows what it's like," he said, after a pause.

"But if the lady does not mind, why should you?"

"Happen as Ruth wouldn't have you, sir, if you didn't love her."

"That would be awkward, I admit. I don't love her now, however, and what would be the use of saying I did? Suppose we——"

"Asking your pardon, Mr. Phythian, but how would you court her if you didn't make love to her?"

"I do not know, I am sure. But one cannot make bricks without straw, and I have no straw. If I could not make love I should have to try and make something else that she would like as well. Really, I think my sister ought to settle the difficulty. I should like to see her puzzled a bit."

"Then shall we put that by for a while?"

"With the greatest pleasure in the world, my dear sir. Let me see; I have already dwelt, as per order, on the fact that it is 'a Phythian—Phythian of Cottesley—who seeks the hand of your daughter in marriage.'"

"Yes, sir, and I'm mighty proud of it, too. The Phythians, as everybody knows, have got good blood in their veins, and lots of good money to back it up. I'd as soon she married you, sir, as the squire himself, damn him!" Quite impromptu was the expletive, and startled the miller almost as much as it did Balthasar.

"Goodness me! what a mercy you are not the Almighty!" ejaculated Balthasar.

"I ask your pardon, sir. I didn't know it was so nigh my tongue's end, or I'd have swallowed it," said the miller, with some confusion of face.

"Ah! then I am glad you dropped it. There is such a thing as indigestion of the soul, and swallowed curses are apt to bring it on. Surely the squire is one of the last men deserving of a curse."

"Happen he is, but he's gone and got the better on me anent that strip of land by the Scarthin, and—Lord, sir, if I didn't swear it out now and then, I should choke!"

"What! the Jack Wragg land that you and Mr. Sims fought for at the sale?"

"The very same, sir. That new blacksmith fellow has gone and sold it to him for just what he gave for it."

"Has he really? At any rate, he has paid a fancy price for it."

"He'd have paid double, and jumped at it. And so would I, rather than he should have had it now. And to think, sir, that villain Kneebone as good as promised to let me have it!"

"Ah! I see now why he is a villain. He has favored your rival. If that does not prove a man a villain I should like to know what would!"

"So say I, sir."

"By the by, talking of blacksmiths reminds me, is he keeping on that naturalist nephew of yours?"

"Yes," growled the miller.

"I am glad to hear it. What with his beautiful Italian face

and his scientific proclivities, he makes quite a picturesque figure for a village blacksmith. I understand you have never heard anything of his father from the day he disappeared?"

"That is so," answered the miller, and involuntarily he put his hand to his nether lip. The undying smart was still there. It was evident that he had no desire to pursue the subject, for he said quite abruptly, "I'm not a poor man, Mr. Phythian." Balthasar looked surprised at the irrelevant remark, but said nothing. The miller seemed uneasy at this, and moved about in his chair. At last he said, "If she marries to my fancy I'll give her from five to ten thousand pounds down. And as much, happen, when I die."

"Well, the man who despises money is a fool, be he bachelor or bridegroom."

"That's marrow truth, let who will deny it. I don't want, though, to pour my money into an empty box. Money to money, say I, and then it'll breed well. But if she goes contrarious to me she'll just get one shilling of my money, neither more nor less."

"It is all very well to say that before your daughter is married. It is conducive to reflection on the part of a sensible girl. But I should hope that when the thing was done, and could not be undone, you would not bite your thumb at the inevitable in that way."

"Wouldn't I, though! If she makes her bed she shall lie on it."

"That is all the more reason, then, that I should know at the start, for her sake, whether or not you are favorable to my suit," said Balthasar.

At this the miller put on his gravest expression of countenance, and did his best to look as though he were seriously considering the matter; but the effort was too great, and in a little while his face broke out into a broad smile as the strong, proud, laughing joy of his heart rose within him like a tide. His eyes grew bright and his face red as he smote his open palm with his right fist, exclaiming, "Why, it beats my best dream out and out! Mrs. Balthasar Phythian of the Chase! Sounds like poetry! Ay, you may have her, sir, and proud I am to be her father. Shall I call her in and tell her it's all arranged?"

Balthasar sprang to his feet as the miller rose, and said, "My dear sir, stop! Not for the world! A bargain is a bargain. I will see Miss Penelope this day week. I will go now and find Jano. Good-day, Mr. Boden. Much obliged."

He went out quickly, closed the door behind him, and catching sight of the key in the lock he quietly turned it.

CHAPTER XIII

IN A GREEN BOWER

LEFT alone, and all unconscious that he was a prisoner in his own house, the miller reseated himself and soon became lost in thought. He rehearsed again and again the scene he had just gone through with Balthasar Phythian, until by sheer dint of repetition the whole thing lost every vestige of reality, and took on the semblance of a dream. And yet it was no dream; for had not Ruth roused him from his regular Sunday afternoon sleep with the surprising remark that Mr. and Miss Phythian were downstairs, waiting to see him in the parlor? How else came he to be in the parlor, instead of on his bed?

Yet it was passing strange that "Gentleman" Phythian, whom everybody counted a confirmed bachelor, should have taken a fancy to his Ruth. Questionless, the girl had got it in her to carry her head higher than was warranted by her forebears. And for the same, he had rated her more than once, and cast clumsy sarcasms in her face, and broadly hinted that the time would come, as it always came for the likes of her, when a clownish ploughman would be reckoned a godsend. But even he would not be on hand, and she would shrivel into a sere and sour old maid. It was not so to be, it seemed; nathless it might have been so. And who but a born idiot would have counted on a gentleman wanting to marry her? Fancy Ruth the wife of Balthasar Phythian! the sister-in-law of Miss Phythian!! The mistress of the Chase!!! Oh, it was a sweet dream, a strange dream, a wondrous dream! It teemed with multitudinous images full of enchantment, which began to move to and fro in rhythmic order, to the sound of interior music sweet as the sackbut, the psaltery, and the harp, intermingled with the soft melody of the Scarthin that came up from the vale below. His eyes closed, his head dropped, he snored for a short time most unpoetically; then he fell to breathing softly, slowly, and deeply. And sleeping he dreamed the same dream, only it was interwoven through and through with images of horror and terror. Ruth grew into a countess dressed in purple velvet, who pulled out of her pocket a golden

crown. She would have shown him how she looked with it upon her head, but that he had to leave her suddenly and fly, to escape a dread figure in black and red who was ever pursuing him. It was the figure of Abel, his brother; but it was not Abel. Men whispered that it was the figure of Justice, and from its attire it was in search of a murderer. Yet he hid and it passed by, and Ruth, the countess, once more appeared, with the purple velvet gown and the crown in her pocket; and—the figure in black and red came also! And still the miller slept on.

Meanwhile the Phythians had gone. Janoca had seemed in no hurry to leave. She had discussed vegetables with Ruth, and butter-making, and flower-growing, and had just got fairly started on the ever-sweet theme of the bees, when Balthasar came upon the scene. To Ruth he seemed as composed as an oyster; but Janoca, being versed in subtile signs, perceived that he was excited. Ordinarily his mental condition would have furnished no sufficient reason in Janoca's eyes why the bees should not have had full justice done them; but just then her curiosity was a-tiptoe. So she dropped the bees as though they had stung her, and with a few pretty sentences, that came from her lips as naturally as honey from a hive, she took her departure.

Ruth accompanied them to the lane; then she came back and went into the garden at the back of the house, and sat on a rustic bench in a little ivy-covered bower, with the warm April sun in her eyes. It was a late spring, and nature had done next to nothing as yet toward decking herself in the soft delicacies of color. But there was, nevertheless, a kind of still rapture to be drunk from the yellow and purple crocuses, the chaste snowdrops, the flowering whiterock, and the tender green leaves and ruby-red stalks of the greatly daring and frost-defying rhubarb. And Ruth, being a true child of nature, found herself thirsty, and gladly drank of the quiet delight. With the delicate scent of the whiterock mingled, like another perfume of equal sweetness, the memory of Miss Phythian. Her sweet and stately manner, that so well matched the nobility of her countenance and the inimitable charm of her voice, had struck Ruth like a sudden flood of rich and rare music.

Twelve months earlier she had gone for the first time through the duke's palace, and had therein seen the mellow painting of a certain countess of ineffable loveliness. For weeks and months afterward the picture haunted her, and bred in her a wild longing, a delicious despair. Janoca Phythian had nothing of the magic beauty of the dead lady, but she had that

which was beauty's beauty, the spell and sorcery of manner and voice. Moreover, she was alive, and had stood face to face with Ruth, and had talked of fowls and flowers and fruits, of the art and mystery of making preserves that would keep, and butter that her grandmother would have recognized without a label.

There was a certain pine-tree in the woods that had been blown down by a heavy wind a few seasons back. The base of its trunk was a huge mass of uptorn clay held together by a network of roots. When the summer sun was dipping in the west, its red lights fell straight upon the roots of the fallen tree, and burned a mysterious crimson splendor into the mass of imprisoned clay. More than once Ruth had stood at a distance and looked on with feelings akin to his who looked upon the bush burning yet unconsumed. Somehow it seemed to her just now that everything Janoca had touched upon had become transfigured like the pine-root. The touch, the enchanting touch, of ladyhood was upon them. And what is there of base that will not become noble, or mean that will not wax splendid, of vulgar that will not grow refined, of commonplace that will not burn with the beauty of the divinely rare, under the touch of ladyhood? Be it what it may, it is fit only to be cast out and trodden under foot of men.

Suddenly Ruth heard a footstep, and looking up beheld Violet Chalk. She was a woman of about eight-and-twenty, in height and build much resembling Ruth herself; she was a handsome woman, with bright color in her cheeks, laughing brown eyes, and full red lips. She looked brimful of healthy animal life and passion, and in her maiden days had wrought sad havoc in the hearts of the young men of Voe and of more than one neighboring hamlet. Yet, after all, she had gone and thrown herself away upon Silas Chalk, one of the squire's under-keepers—a thin-faced fellow, surly when sober and quarrelsome when drunk, and jealous up to the hilt. Everybody looked to see Violet lose her bright and warm if somewhat coarse beauty, and gay jaunty manner, within a year of her wedding-day; but over two years had now gone by, and still she was neither pale nor sad, but brave and handsome as ever. If she suffered, she was determined the world should be none the wiser. And with the instinct of courage and defiance she seldom left the house until the looking-glass informed her that every trace of private sorrow was veiled. Her sole confidant was Ruth, between whom and herself there existed a peculiar intimacy. From the time when Ruth was two years old, until she was married, Violet had been her nurse, her playmate,

her guardian, her worshipper, her friend and counsellor. She had kept the miller's house for some years, after the death of his wife, and had trained Ruth to be the capital housewife she was. Only Ruth knew what the matrimonial tapestry of Violet's life really was, upon its seamy side. And only Violet knew upon what bough Ruth had hung her heart's nest. In this exchange of joy and sorrow, the equality must needs have been marred but for the really fine sympathy that characterized both the woman and the girl.

"I saw you had company, Miss Ruth, when I came, so I sat down by one of the ricks, and I'm not sure I didn't almost fall asleep. I do so love the sunshine," said Violet, standing in front of Ruth.

"Yes, I knew that before to-day, Violet; and so do I. But I don't think I love it so much by itself as when I see it and feel it working itself into the earth. I am afraid I am not very heavenly-minded. It is the earth I love, more than the sky or the sun—the dear, sweet, beautiful earth!" exclaimed Ruth, with the poetic fervor of all true, strong love.

"Yes, you are fit to be his lady-love. And you will make a bonnie pair some day, both of you a bit mad on the 'dear, sweet, beautiful earth.' But you will grow wiser when you are married, both of you."

"I hope so, Violet. It would be sad if we didn't," said Ruth, with a blush.

"Do you know, I have been thinking, Miss Ruth, you might as well almost marry a gamekeeper as him."

"Violet, for shame! What do you mean?"

"Well, then, a poacher, if you won't have gamekeeper. They are much of a muchness, happen."

"You mean that he is out at night so much? Oh, he would give that up, or I could go with him."

Violet Chalk gave a short laugh, full and ringing and melodious. It was a laugh that went with her constitution, and was full of signification for a psychologist. Such power of laughter stood to trouble and sorrow much as a dog's power of shaking himself stood to water.

"That would last till the honeymoon grew full, and no longer. If I had the saying of 'Yes' again, I would say 'No' to the best man as ever wore shoe-leather, if he had to turn out o' nights. But there! where's Jane?"

"She has not come back from church yet."

"And the miller?"

"I expect he has gone to lie down again. I think I will step in and see," answered Ruth, rising and going toward the house.

"I have got something to tell you, Miss Ruth; but we will talk in the house, if you like," said Violet Chalk, as she tripped along at the heels of the proud-stepping girl whom she still mentally acknowledged as mistress.

At one end of the house there were three or four stone steps, which Ruth descended. Through a small round hole in an old worm-eaten door she thrust two of her long and lovely white fingers, and shooting back a wooden bolt, opened the door and entered that paradise of romance, luxury, and sweetness—an old-fashioned dairy. The roughly-built stone walls were white as the driven snow, the red-tiled floor flecklessly clean. The temperature was low, and the air fresh and sweet as the moor-breeze. There stood metal creaming-pans, broad and long, whose surfaces were mighty lakes of butyraceous scum, of unknown depth. On blue-gray slabs of stone, all round the room, stood huge brown earthenware pots with purple ears, full of the same divine liquor in half a-dozen stages of sweetness. Through the open door the sun stole in coyly for a few feet and lay on the spotless crimson floor, as if amazed to find such delicate freshness and purity in a place that seemed sacred to the shades. Another moment and the stealthy intruder was thrust out by the closing of the door in his face, and left lying on the green old bricks and the friendly steps of well-worn grit. These knew him well enough, and were glad of his company, though they generally hailed him as a stranger, seeing that though he claimed to pass that way daily, he had what seemed an ill-bred trick of often hiding his face.

Leaving the dairy, Ruth ascended a flight of steps that led into a passage, dim and narrow, that lay between the antique living-room and the parlor wherein the miller sat sleeping. The best room being but seldom used, it was customary to keep the door locked. So when Ruth tried the door and found it locked, with the key as usual on the outside, she naturally concluded that her father was not there. The living-room was empty, but the miller's Sunday hard-head was on its proper hook, and his stick of knotted ash rested against the clock-case in the corner. Evidently the miller had decided to finish his Sunday nap, in proper orthodox fashion, in his own broad bed, four-posted and tent-like. Ruth stepped to the open stairs door and gently closed it; then she came and stood at the entrance of the passage.

"He doesn't mean to let his visitors lose him his regular Sunday sleep, it seems," remarked Violet Chalk, who knew the ways of the miller and his household to the smallest details.

"Yet he was fast asleep when they came. Violet, why cannot I be like Miss Phythian?"

"An old maid? Happen because somebody won't let you. And I don't think you are cut out for that kind of life either, Miss Ruth."

"You foolish thing! I didn't mean that, of course. I am thinking that maidenhood and marriage have very little to do with it. Somehow the memory of her is like that of a sweet old song—like one of the songs of Zion to those who sat by the rivers of Babylon. She is a noble woman, I am sure."

"I fancy I like the gentleman better than the lady. But then, happen I commonly do. It's the way with most of the women, I'm thinking."

"Perhaps to their sorrow, Violet. Yes, I like Mr. Phythian; he is—but you have something to tell me?"

"Oh, it will keep. It's only a little message from my lord."

"O Violet! and you haven't told me yet! Tell me at once!"

"He wanted to know if you could meet him this evening between seven and eight in the King's Lot?"

A glad answer sprang to her lips, but a true and delicate instinct checked its utterance. A wave of splendid color ebbed and flowed in her face as she stood in the attitude of reflection. "Yes," she said, quietly, "I think I can, between half-past seven and eight. Shall you see him again?"

Violet Chalk looked at the clock and said, smiling, "In ten minutes he will be in the plantation, if he isn't there now."

"O Violet! dare I, just for a minute?"

"Why not? Your father won't be down for an hour yet. I will stay here, in case he should come down, if you like, Miss Ruth."

Just then there was a low hum of voices, and going to the window Ruth beheld Jane standing by the gate that gave into the lane, in conversation with her lover. "No, there is Jane, so you need not stay, thank you. And I shall not need you in the plantation either," said Ruth, as they left the house.

The two lovers had instinctively sought the momentary shelter of a rick ere they parted. So that Ruth came upon them almost unawares. The girl looked extremely innocent, but the man doffed his cap, wriggled his legs as if trying to put them into his pockets, and waxed red in the face. Said Ruth, "I shall be back in a little while, Jane. Look after the house, and when you go in take care not to waken your master. He is

asleep in his room." Then she passed on and down the lane with Violet Chalk, while Jane remained with her lover beside the rick. . . .

Meanwhile Miller Boden had been having *un mauvais quart d'heure*. Awakened by Ruth trying the door, he stretched out his legs and inwardly thanked his stars that his nap had been comparatively sweet and refreshing. He had come to be content with small mercies; he had composed a scale of comparative horrors, and not to awake with a start and in a cold sweat was to have a grand sleep! He was on the point of leaving the room when he heard the voices of Ruth and Violet Chalk within a few feet of the door near which he happened to be sitting. He had no thought of listening to their conversation, which he did not for a moment suppose would possess any attractions for him. But suddenly, with almost startling distinctness, he caught the words of Violet Chalk, "An old maid? Happen because somebody won't let you." Thereat he pricked his ears, and bent sideways to listen. Presently he rose with infinite precaution from his chair, and with a cat's tread went close to the door and bent his ear to the keyhole. There he remained, crouched and cramped, until he heard them go away out of the house. Then he straightened himself up, and his big red face could hardly be said to be black as thunder, seeing that it was still red. To his great disgust he was unable to hear more than snatches of the conversation—stray words and broken sentences only. There might have been a gusty wind blowing, the way their voices rose and fell and their tones changed. But though he had not heard much, he had heard enough to fill him with suspicion. Was it possible that Ruth had a secret lover? No; that was not like Ruth. And yet there was certainly a man in conversation, for he had caught Ruth's inquiry, "Shall you see him again?" Who could it be?

The miller battered his brains to discover a likely beguiler among the men of Voe, but all to no purpose. There was not one whom he could think that Ruth would care for. Yes, there was one—one with a face and manner and individuality such as might beguile any girl who was not separated from him by a bridgeless gulf. Ruth in love with her cousin Abel! The miller shuddered, scratched his lower lip, and mentally threw the idea, with a suppressed curse, into the limbo reserved for damnable ideas. Perhaps, after all, he was only making a mountain out of a mole-hill. He would keep his eyes a little more open, and hasten on the Phythian affair. Ah! there was juicy

sweetness in that thought! In three short months Ruth might be the wife of Balthasar Phythian. Then it would be for her husband to look after her.

The miller went to the door, tried it, turned the handle this way and that, shook it again and again, and finally bent down and peered into the crevice between the door and the jamb. It was locked! Then was his face a sight to see. It was a magnificent crimson, dappled with purple. She, Ruth—the hussy!—had actually locked him in! It was a confirmation of his worst suspicions; there was some deep plot in it. He was too wroth to swear, until he looked at the window; then he swore deep and loud. Had it been a modern window, with a sash, he would have been through it in no time; but it was one of your old-fashioned leaded windows, with diamond panes, opening in a small section that did not afford room for his head, to say nothing of his big frame. He pulled out of his pocket a large jack-knife, and spent several minutes trying to shoot back the lock; but he could not manage it. Then he knocked loudly on the door, and called out, "Ruth! Jane! Ruth!" No one answered. Thereupon he sat down and did his best to play the philosopher; but it was hard work instead of play, as most folk find out when they make the endeavor. For a while his anger burned fiercely toward Ruth—a thing which rarely happened, for she was his all in all. Presently it occurred to him that if Ruth had locked the door, knowing him to be within, she would certainly have chosen some other spot than the passage in which to talk with Violet Chalk. Like a flash he saw that he had misjudged Ruth. This was no small relief to him; it took off a heavy load from his mind.

The Phythian aspect of affairs recurred to him; his spirits began to rise; the humorous side of the situation showed itself in brief spells, like glimpses of a blue sky through sudden rifts in the clouds. But again a disquieting thought seized upon him. Why did Ruth choose the passage to talk in? Was it because she thought he was upstairs and would be less likely to overhear her? Turn it which way he would, this seemed to be the likeliest reason. But then he had already misjudged the girl once, and maybe if his wits were clearer, he would see that he was misjudging her again. He was so thinking when he heard some one in the living-room. He knocked loudly, and said, "Open the door." Whereupon Jane, thinking only of robbers, and startled out of her love-sick wits, began to scream.

"Unlock the door, and don't be an idiot!" cried the miller, lustily.

The girl recognized the voice of her master and cried, "Where be you, sir?"

"Where? Why, here, in the best room, locked in like a prisoner."

Jane unlocked the door, and throwing it open gasped, "Lord-a-mercy, master! what brings you locked in here?"

"Your mistress, I suppose. I was asleep, and I dare say she thought I was upstairs."

"She did that, for certain. She said as much when she went down the lane."

"Well, you needn't say anything to her about it when she comes back; happen it would trouble her a bit. I'll have some tea as soon as you can get it ready."

CHAPTER XIV

WEN GOTT BETRÜGT, DER IST WOHL BETROGEN

“GOOD-DAY, Mr. Phythian, and I hope you are in good health, sir? I was a-wondering if you would come to-day, sir, after what you said last Sunday.”

“It has been a curious week, Mr. Boden. Some of the days have gone like hours, and some of the hours like days. Jano, my sister, has made light of my condition. I was to walk in the park at midnight and seek the sweet influences of the moon. She even advised me to turn poet of a sudden, and try the effect of a sonnet inscribed to ‘Penelope.’ But I did not come to talk with you. Is Miss Penelope within?”

“Yes; she’s somewhere about, sir. Happen she’s in the bower in the back-garden.”

“In the bower in the back-garden? That sounds quite pretty—much better than, ‘In the parlor playing the piano.’ Miller, tell me, is the lady devoted to that instrument?”

“Well, no, sir—not that I know on. You see, she’s fond of music, as she ought to be, for I paid a pretty penny to teach her; but she likes the organ, sir, better than the piano. I’d as lief have a hurdy-gurdy as either, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Thank heaven for taste!—I mean hers, not yours, miller. Yours, if you will allow your prospective son-in-law to say so, is villainously bad. Musically, you deserve—I speak as your prospective son-in-law—to be damned. A piano is a weak instrument, fit only for women of the weaker sort. Fancy a Miriam, to say nothing of a Moses, playing the piano! Now, an organ of proper dimensions has the melody and power and beauty of all other noble instruments combined. In the ear of a dying saint its soft ecstatic sweetness may form a fit prelude to the mighty music of seraphim and cherubim, of which the first notes are already breaking in upon his spirit, trembling and eager for its great flight; while its mellow thunder and proud tumultuous gladness are equal to the march of a triumphant king at the head of a great host of veterans, seasoned with war and flushed with conquest. In the bower in the back-garden. No; don’t lead me—direct me. I will go to her alone. One word—does she expect me?”

"I gave her a hint, sir."

"She knows my errand, then?"

"Happen she does, sir."

"I am glad she does. Round the corner there; thank you. Without doubt I shall easily find the 'bower in the back-garden.'" So saying, Balthasar Phythian left the miller in the courtyard and proceeded to the back-garden. It was a delightful old garden, especially in summer-time, full of currant-trees and gooseberry-bushes, beehives and sweet-smelling flowers, pear-trees, plum-trees, cherry-trees, and apple-trees, quaint and homely, that threw out their branches low down, as if to invite sweet-hearted people like themselves to sit upon them and gently sway themselves in the sunshine. There were box-hedges in the garden, and beautiful holly-trees. Ivy covered all the back of the house, except the casement windows, and had seized upon two large cherry-trees, and out of their spreading branches had built an evergreen arch, a shelter from sun and rain alike. There was a well in the centre of a tiny grass-plot, with chain and windlass. The woodwork, green with age, matched the low ring of stone in which the well stood, coated with the daintiest of mosses in all the shades of green and gray. The spring was late, but the daffodils had opened since last Sunday, and the thorn hedges had mysteriously covered themselves with bits of curled and crumpled bloom of tenderest green. The larks had also arrived, and just now one of those prime musicians was overhead, shedding a rain of music over many fields, himself hidden in the light. A little contemptible winged creature, the laborious bee, as Master Auceps styleth him, was out in full force with all his family; and though he could not compete with the divine ditty of the invisible songster, his lowly hum had an earth-charm all its own.

Balthasar stood resting on his elbow against one of the trees, and took in the garden. Simple as it was, it had for him an unspeakable charm, a delicious attraction. There were in it health, sweet sanity, cool, serene, natural poetry and prose, miracle and law, divinest of ethics, and truest of religions—something, too, of the pathetic in its lowliness and modesty and low esteem. "In the bower in the back-garden! Fittest of all places in which to find one's love! I wonder shall I find mine here? If not, I am apt to think it is hidden beyond all finding. I must try and find it—in her! I will remember that she loves the organ," murmured Balthasar, apparently to a half-open daffodil in his hand. He moved forward slowly, halting every few steps to explore some mass of evergreen which

looked like a masked arbor. At length, near the far end of the garden, he came quite unexpectedly upon a short, straight path covered with the white ground rock of the lead-mines. His glance followed this path to its termination, and then he halted. There was the ivy-covered bower, and within sat Ruth, with her head bent and a closed book on her lap. He waited for some moments, then he coughed; but the girl did not stir. She was fast asleep.

"She expected Balthasar Phythian—one of the Phythians of Cottersley—would wait upon her with an offer of his hand and fortune, and she is so excited that she—goes fast asleep! She is evidently a girl of some originality. Shall I withdraw forever? Alas! Jano is a lioness in the way. Shall I scrawl my vows upon a leaf of my pocket-book and deposit them at her feet and retire? Alas! there are such things as vagrant winds and thievish jackdaws, and they have no sense of property. Yet it is cruel to wake her"—a cough—"outrageously cruel to wake a girl up simply to ask her to be one's wife!"—a louder cough—"yet one cannot propose to a girl when she is asleep."

Tiny insects with wonderful wings, the first of the season, were bobbing up and down in the sunshine, as if suspended from the sky by invisible elastic. One of these, more humorous or adventurous than its fellows, made a sudden leap into the jaws of death, and plunged madly down Balthasar's throat. Now he began to cough in earnest and to some purpose. The blood came into his face, the tears into his eyes; while he scraped and rasped and roared to dislodge the "wee beastie" from his trachea. All thought of Ruth vanished, while he bent down with his hands on his knees and gave cacophonous battle with the intruder. The conflict ended, he raised himself erect, and feeling blindly for his handkerchief, brought it to his tearful eyes.

"O Mr. Phythian! are you ill?" inquired a soft voice at his elbow.

"Ha! you are awake at last, then, Miss Penelope," said Balthasar. His voice seemed to tremble on the verge of a cough, and he held his handkerchief in front of his face as though he had been crying.

Altogether, it was rather comical, thought Ruth. "Was I really asleep, then? I am quite ashamed you should have found me so. The sun was so warm, and Tennyson always puts me to sleep and gives me the sweetest of dreams," said Ruth, a little timidly, but with sufficient self-possession to choose her words. She felt she owed so much of good-breeding to Mr. Phythian, of all men.

"I am very glad you could sleep. I think I envied you. Are you fond of Tennyson?" said Balthasar, recovering his normal composure and stowing away the ridiculous handkerchief.

"Yes; the little I have read of him makes me think I should like to read all he has written."

"It is a blessed thing to be a Tennyson, to be able to write something that stirs the fancy and enriches the sentiment of every sweet girl and woman in the land. I bethink me that he says somewhere, 'In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love.' It is springtide now, Miss Penelope," said Balthasar, in a low voice, while he felt quite pleased with his own fluency.

The thing, after all, was not so dreadful, if it kept on as smoothly as it began. Indeed it was really pleasant to sentimentalize with a sweet, sensible girl like Penelope.

"Whose 'Fancy' was it, please?" asked Ruth demurely, with a softly rising color in her face.

"A young man's—ah! I see a point there. You think the world would have smiled if the poet had said, 'A middle-aged man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love? But that is due solely to the word 'lightly.' A middle-aged man should do nothing lightly, especially in love matters. I hope you do not think me frivolous? I am getting perilously near forty."

"Oh, no, Mr. Phythian! I do not think you are frivolous," said Ruth, with a soft laugh. She added, "But I think you bear your age well. When I am forty I shall feel myself an old woman."

"Some women at that age are old; they are the women whose youthfulness adds no additional charm to life. By the same token, Miss Penelope, when you are forty you will be as a flower in full bloom."

"Now I know what flattery is. Why do you call me Penelope?"

"Because every one else calls you Ruth. We like our own little private garden better than the finest of public parks. Yet I like the name Ruth, and the quality. I am here to-day because I would no longer be Ruth-less."

The girl cast her eyes down, while she blushed and seemed to draw away from her companion.

Balthasar looked at her curiously for some moments, and then he said, "I know a man very much of my age and make-up. His family is not among the lordly oaks, nor yet the humble currant-bushes. He is a sort of walnut-tree, or possibly not unlike one of these large-boled apple-trees whose dig-

nity is as genuine as its quaintness. He has money enough to keep a lady in luxury. He is a bit of a scholar, a bit of a philosopher, a bit of the man of the world, and a bit of a recluse. His worst enemy never impeached his moral courage or his truthfulness. His friends say flattering things of his temper, for which they give him no credit, however, attributing everything to nature and nothing to grace. This is unjust; it is the bitter blending with the sweet. Now, if this man were to come and say to you, 'Miss Penelope, I need a wife, and you certainly ought to be charged with some man's happiness. If you will take me for better for worse, I will keep only unto you until death us do part. Faithful in service, affectionate in sentiment, I will identify your happiness with my honor, and will make it the business of my life to preserve both inviolate.' Tell me, if he spake thus to you would you incline your ear graciously unto him and give him of the sweet honey of hope?"

He stood before her with uncovered head and with an anxious look in his eyes and upon his face, waiting for her reply. Was he in love with the girl, who stood with bowed head and burning face, a piece of maiden grace and sweetness and melody? Half an hour earlier he would have answered for himself with a truthful negative. But just now he would have declined an answer, for motives of doubt as much as of delicacy. Somehow his oblique wooing of the girl had reacted upon himself, and had suddenly begotten within him a new, a quite new, and almost painfully delicious sensation. By some subtle magic Penelope had become transfigured in his eyes. She was no longer his ironical lady of the mill—merely a sweet, intelligent girl, with instincts and tastes decidedly superior to her station. All this realism had left her now, and she was enveloped in that mystic medium that dissolves or interpenetrates the common sheath and mask of our humanity and discloses the angel or the goddess in the woman or the girl.

Balthasar gazed at Ruth in silent wonder. Whence had come so swiftly, so mysteriously, the strange beauty, the ineffable sweetness, the divine mystery, the strong, passionate charm, the semi-religious, semi-voluptuous enchantment that seemed hers, inalienably hers, by the same beautiful law of propriety that justified the loveliness and fragrance of the rose? Surely, he thought, this was the love of which he had often read, at which he had often smiled—sung by poets because it was a form of madness peculiar to their genius, written about by novelists because inferiors love to imitate their superiors, though they are only equal to their follies and defects. He

was neither poet nor novelist, yet already he had accepted their theory and was prepared to defend their mad gospel of love, with its miracle of transfiguration. Was it really new-born love? Ah me! how glorious, how lovable she did look! And yet all this time she said not a word. He seemed to have been looking at her, as in a vision, for half an hour; while in reality it was ninety seconds at the most. He drew near to her. What he would have given just to touch her lovely white fingers! But he dare not. The splendid barrier of her maidenhood seemed like a protecting hedge of divinity, and to touch her even in reverence savored of offence.

Of a sudden she raised her head and met his gaze bravely as she said, "Mr. Phythian, I know from experience how sweet is the honey of hope, and I would not lightly rob man or woman of it. But we cannot give what is not ours to give. I should have no hope, on my own behalf, for him, and therefore I could give him none."

"I hope you do not mean all you say?" said Balthasar, with an odd mental sensation of falling from a great height.

"I think I do. I am sure I do. Only I should have said besides that I was not ignorant of the very, very great honor the gentleman did me. I could not be less than grateful, less than proud. I think, if a girl were what she ought to be, such a thing would never cease to be treasured in her memory. But I—I meant what I said," answered Ruth, disdaining not to allow the womanly pity of her heart to show itself unveiled in her eyes.

Balthasar gave a deep sigh.

"You think he would be too old?" Ruth shook her head.

"Too odd?" Another shake of her head.

"Too set in his ways?" Another shake.

"Too matter-of-fact and unsympathetic?" Another shake.

"Would he be precisely the kind of man you would not like for a husband in any case?" Ruth gave him a splendidly frank look as she replied:

"No, decidedly not, Mr. Phythian."

The tone was worthy of the words, and both were worthy of the nobly frank glance. It was the best thing in the line of compliment that had ever befallen Balthasar Phythian. It was what any man might have felt richer for having—an added touch of honor and nobility.

Balthasar bowed low his acknowledgments. There was a short silence, which was broken by Balthasar saying, "I have no wish to trespass on forbidden ground, Miss Penelope; but I would rather trespass than lose my way. Will you forgive

me if I ask you to give me a clew to the state of your mind? Could you, without paining yourself, tell me why the case would be hopeless?"

"Oh, please don't ask me! It is a secret, and I could not tell you unless——" she paused.

"Unless I promised to keep it? Ha! I begin to see light. I am too late, methinks. Miss Penelope, Balthasar Phythian never yet betrayed a trust."

"Oh, I am sure of that!" cried Ruth.

"I am less satisfied than ever, though. As a rival, he is naturally the wrong man for you. He is a villain, and will make your life a curse to you. I must know who he is that I may slay him. Then I gather, since it is a secret, that your father knows nothing about it. He would hardly have talked to me as he did, had he known that your affections were already engaged. You make me miserable, my child!"

My child! What a paternal touch for a hopeless lover! They both felt the touch. It was not unlike a slight shock of electricity. It was unpremeditated, involuntary, and genuine; and though it jarred, it did not repel. On the contrary, it seemed to call into existence a bond of sympathy exactly adapted to their natures, without fretting and galling. Odd, very odd! Life is odd, but true. That one word *child*, uttered spontaneously, not disavowed, but left to stand uncorrected, wrought a change of mental attitude in both man and maid such as might not have been reached after long and strenuous effort. Their glances met, and each made to the other a silent confession that the new-born truth was recognized and accepted.

"It is better so," murmured Ruth, giving him her hand, while her eyes filled with tears.

He did not ask, and she had no need to explain, *what* was better so, or *why*. This was transformation number two. *Wen Gott betrügt, der ist wohl betrogen!* When the gods are merry they will have their joke, willy-nilly. They passed into the bower, where Ruth seated herself, but Balthasar remained standing. He became lost in thought. Ruth watched him for some time, and thought he had a beautiful face for a man. Suddenly he looked at her and said, "I do not know what Jano will think—or say—or do. She will probably wish that she could put me in the corner like a naughty boy, or send me to bed without any supper. Don't you think you could explain matters better than I could to her?"

CHAPTER XV

A CONSPIRACY

"I AM sure I do not know. You seem to think she will be very disappointed. Did she really wish it?" asked Ruth, with a distinct accent of doubt in her voice.

"I assure you there is not the smallest doubt on the subject," answered Balthasar.

"You mean she raised no objection?"

"To be perfectly frank, Miss Penelope, it was Jano's idea from first to last."

"Not your own?" Ruth's eyes were wide open now, seeing which Balthasar thought it might be as well to hedge a little.

"Jano, you know, is more fertile in ideas than I, but perhaps is not quite so practised in conduct. She furnishes the idea, I work it out. You laugh—at least you look as if you were going to. But I assure you it is a capital arrangement. I sometimes think if it were carried out on a large scale, and loyally, the world would be less of a jumble than it is."

But Ruth was not thinking of the big world at all. All the vitality of Balthasar's theory was run into his application of it to herself. In the matter of wife-seeking, for instance, it did seem strange for Balthasar to follow not his own initiative, but that of his sister. She would like to have put a number of questions on the subject, which was as attractive as it was odd. But what impressed her most was the idea that Janoca, the sweet and stately, the dignified and gracious Janoca Phythian, had actually chosen her as fit and worthy to wear and bear the Phythian name and honor. People not infrequently entertain and consort with ideas which occasion no friction or heart-burning, so long as they remain personal, private, and unembodied. But let them once become incarnate in speech, and they stand a good chance of encountering the cold shoulder, if not the contempt and scorn of their former hosts. But Ruth Boden would have stood bravely by her private thought just now, even had it been cast into the rough and hard mould of speech. That thought was this: "In none of the finer, richer, truer senses of the word am I a lady like her. But she must

believe that I would be if I could, that I love ladyhood as the pure stuff of womanhood, that I would rather be a real lady poor than a duchess rich and vulgar. Not title, not genius, not learning, not saintship is worthy to unfasten the shoe-latchet of the real lady. And yet she thought me worthy to be her brother's wife! ! !” From which it is plain that Ruth had both an exalted and refined conception of ladyhood and a noteworthy prejudice against the vulgarization of that loveliest of lovely words—lady.

And if it were not ridiculous, and a sign of utter incapacity to appreciate contemporaneous facts, one might be tempted to wish that so long as *the fact* of ladyhood exists, the term **LADY** might have been saved from the base soil and smirch of popular usage.

Said Ruth, “I should like to tell her how proud I am that she thought me fit to be—anything to her. I shall never forget it.”

“I have long had a suspicion that Jano was no fool. I know it for a certainty now. But you have not answered me yet. Will you tell her?”

“Oh, I wish I could say I would! but I don't know how I could. I should have to tell her—everything.”

“You may trust her. She is as true as steel.”

“I am sure of that, but—oh, I'm afraid I am a wretchedly selfish girl! But I have my own trouble before me, Mr. Phythian. I tremble to think how father will take it when he knows,” said Ruth, while the tears rushed involuntarily to her eyes.

“Nay, nay, you must have no trouble on that score. Leave that to me. I'll tell him that the match is off—that we do not suit each other. He will understand that a girl is not obliged to take a man old enough to be her father. Come to think of it, the idea is ridiculous. What right has an old foggy like me to aspire to sweet eighteen? I am ashamed of my impertinence, and I will tell him so.”

“But I can see he has set his heart upon it. And I am not surprised at it. He will want to know why I have dared to throw away such an honor, and I cannot tell him.”

“Tut, tut! An honor! Why not let the cat out of the bag at once?”

“Oh, Mr. Phythian, you don't know! He seems to hate him. I think he would rather see me dead than attached to him.”

“That sounds very shocking, Miss Penelope. It makes things look serious. Won't you tell me who it is?”

"It is my cousin, Abel Boden."

"What! the picturesque young blacksmith?"

"Yes."

"Well, well, well! I have always taken an interest in that young fellow; he always brings back memories of Italy. And I hear he is no common man. Quite a naturalist, isn't he?"

"Yes. He is wonderfully clever, and so good and noble. But father can't forget the quarrel he had with his own brother, Abel's father, years ago."

"So I understand. The miller has got a bad name through that business. People cry shame upon him for his treatment of his own brother's child."

"I know, I know; but father doesn't see it in that light. No girl could have wished a better father than he has been to me. And I tried so hard not to care for Abel, for father's sake. But it is of no use; we have loved each other from childhood," said Ruth; and the confession put her modesty to the defence of a sweet blush.

"Dear me! what a wise owl I must have looked in your eyes! Ah, well! in this matter I am going to stand by both of you. With your permission I will just think it over a bit, alone."

So saying, Balthasar stepped from the bower and promenaded slowly up and down the short white-gravelled path in front. Presently he halted before Ruth and said:

"Miss Penelope, we must kill two birds with one stone. Your bird is your father. My bird is Jano. The truth is, I do not want Jano to know how things have gone with us two."

"Why?"

"Well, one secret deserves another. She is determined to get me married, by hook or by crook. I cannot exactly tell you her reason, except that it concerns the future disposition of our joint property. If you could have had me it would have been all right. But I do not want to try again. Now, could not we manage between us to hoodwink both of them? They conspire against us; why should not we conspire against them?"

"I don't see how we can."

"It is easy enough. Suppose we give them to understand that, while we are not engaged to each other, we do not absolutely hate each other—that we have a sort of understanding with each other. You can easily explain matters to the picturesque gentleman, cannot you?"

"Oh, yes; but——"

"But what?"

"We should be telling an untruth."

"That is the rub, Miss Penelope, I know. But I would do the bulk of the romancing; and I think I could do it cheaply, so to speak. I mean I would not deal much in the genuine article. I would avoid the costly article of falsehood pure and simple, and go in for cheap but effective imitation. A few white lies mixed skilfully with a few half-truths, and we are delivered out of the hands of our enemies. Indeed, I do not see how otherwise I can avert your father's anger."

Nor did Ruth. Likewise, she failed to grasp the real truth of the situation. Not on his own account would Balthasar have veered a hair's breadth from the truth—Jano the terrible, and matrimony the awful, notwithstanding. The miller's almost rancorous hatred of Abel was common knowledge. For some few years it had lain sluggish and dormant, and some people opined that it had eaten away its own heart and had died for want of sustenance. But since the day of the sale of Jack Wragg's place and the coming of the new smith these sanguine people had had occasion to change their opinion.

Hate will hibernate like a bear. Deprived of opportunity, like the famous grains of wheat in the pyramid, it will hold its vitality against time with invincible patience and miraculous endurance. Hate will do anything but die. Considered as an illustration of the scientific doctrine of natural selection, its hold on life is highly suggestive. There are germs which trouble the soul of the experimenter who would like to demonstrate the truth of spontaneous generation. They refuse to be killed. He may boil them, he may burn them, but he is never absolutely sure that they are dead. These are the molecules that constitute the physical basis of hate in the human organism.

The miller had assimilated his full share of these unloving atoms, and their activity of late had been unequalled. How they would dance and pirouette, gyrate and swing, toss and tumble in atomic madness, should the miller by evil chance light on Ruth's secret! It was a commotion too fearful for Balthasar to contemplate unmoved. Some time, of course, the miller would have to learn the truth; but not at present, while his hate was new-blown toward Abel and his hope for Ruth was flowing like a full tide.

"I think it is our best way out of the difficulty. It will be awkward for you at times, I fear. You must try and see the humorous side of it. I think it will be a capital joke. Be brave, and all will come out right" said Balthasar, when Ruth, after considerable hesitation, had agreed to his proposal.

"Am I a very naughty girl?" Ruth inquired, as she gave him her hand at parting.

"No, not very. You are just naughty enough to be nice."

"Suppose Abel should object?"

"Is he a jealous fellow?"

"No," answered Ruth, coloring; "but still he might object."

"Then you must turn him over to me. I will manage him. Hei! what a comedy I have put my hand to! If Jano only knew! But there! if she will trust me with ideas, she must accept my embodiment of them. *Ich hab' gethan, was ich nicht lassen konnte.* Now I will to your father." He raised his hat, bowed in grand style, and left Ruth alone in the bower in the back-garden.

She remained there until Jane came and announced that tea was ready and the miller was asking for her; then she went in, full of fear and trembling. The miller was unusually quiet, and sat the greater part of the tea through without saying anything; nor was Ruth inclined to break the silence. At length, however, the miller remarked, "Anyhow, he is a queer kind of man. I can't quite get the hang of him, can you?"

"Whom do you mean, father?" asked Ruth, a trifle nervous.

"Who? Why, Mr. Phythian, of course."

"Yes, he is a bit peculiar. I think it takes time to understand him."

"That's true. Yet I gather you understood one another to-day, eh?"

Ruth flushed crimson. "Yes, I knew what he meant; but that is a different thing from understanding him as a man."

"Happen you'll have time for that when you are his wife." Whereat Ruth bent her head, but made no answer.

"Thinking it over, I'm none so sure but what you did the right thing, Ruth. It's as well to hang back awhile. Men are much of a breed all through. They would rather a girl ran from them, so be that she lets them overhaul her at last. It's a mighty fine thing for you, my lady, and I hope you will play your cards well. Let there be no fooling, no dilly-dallying. Watch your opportunity, and when it comes use it. He won't be content with things as they are for long, you may be sure; though he seems well pleased with his headway so far. But don't carry the thing too far. When the time comes, close the bargain, name the day, and then thank your stars that you had a father with wit enough to count a pile of schooling-money as bread cast on the waters. Come and give me a kiss, lassie," said the miller, pushing back his chair from the table.

Ruth came round the table and kissed him.

"You don't look very gladsome, considering the luck you are in. What is it, lassie? Fretting about leaving your

crusty, rusty old dad? You won't grow too proud to know him when you're the fine lady, shall you? Well, cry it out, lass. It's a woman's way when she's o'erjoyed."

Ruth's head was upon his shoulder, as she stood behind him, weeping bitterly. Oh, if she could only have opened her heart to him just for once! Yes, he loved her, fiercely, passionately, sometimes angrily. He clung to her desperately; he had nothing else to cling to. But he never loved her as her nature cried out for—in such wise that her heart could open and take him in, and feed him with its secret life of joy and sorrow. Into her inner real life he had never penetrated, never thought of penetrating. Confidence demands confidence. His own interior life was a *terra incognita*—a world shut up, sealed, guarded, unspeakable. Maybe this accounted for the fact that parent and child lived lives apart as the North Pole from the South Pole. When Ruth had done sobbing the miller rose from his chair and got his hat and stick for a stroll. At the door he turned and said:

"He said something about keeping it quiet for a while. I'm not going to brag about it, nor yet put a gag in my mouth. A friend can bide his time; but if I should run across one of the other sort, and I thought he needed a choke-pear, happen I should let drop a word."

It would seem that the miller was not counting on a white crow or a black swan when he contemplated the possibility of encountering one of "the other sort." For in the space of four or five days it was the one theme that held all tongues, how that Gentleman Phythian was "sweet" on Ruth Boden. In the lead mines of Yewdle Brig, in the stone quarries of Potter's Carr, among the marble inlayers of Chaughford Nick, among the silk weavers of Ribble Mocr, in hill hamlet and in vale village, men and women found something unusually flavoured in this piece of gossip. It was all owing to the personality of Balthasar. For miles round everybody knew him or knew of him. A certain piquancy, a certain tinge of romance, clung to him; he was always spoken of with respect, seasoned with a dash of the awe that attaches to mystery. And now at last the romantic bachelor was entrapped, like his ordinary unromantic brothers, in the net of feminine wile and charm. That it would be an ordinary courtship and an every-day marriage no one pretended to believe. It would be distinguished and made extraordinary by something or other, without doubt—by something in keeping with his singular character.

Voe itself was deeply stirred by the news. Not for twenty years or more, since the day when they turned out, headed by

the squire himself, to try and find Abel Boden, the fugitive from justice, had the Voese been so charged with the social electricity of surprise and sympathy running irresistibly to speech. The women gathered at one or two of the cottages which had been time out of mind their rallying-points, and at the little *omnium-gatherum* shop just below the smithery. Of old, the men had met on state occasions at Jack Wragg's smithery, under the spreading elm; but poor Jack Wragg was under the sod now. And the new-comer had brought new ways with him—ways that hardly went with the general fitness of things. Even the anvil gave out a foreign kind of music nowadays, and certain patriarchal nostrils could not for the life of them detect so much as "th' same owd smell" from the frizzling hoofs of the horses. For obvious reasons, the men of Voe could no longer assemble in front of the forge, and had to content themselves with the common room at the Nag's Head, and with the stone banquette that ran along the parapet of the bridge across the Scarthin, just where it curved itself into the village.

From the Nag's Head to the banquette, and from the bridge to the Nag's Head, backward and forward passed Am Ende, with increasing unsteadiness of gait at each journey. Being in great demand, his self-importance grew like a magic gourd. All he knew of the affair was what he had picked up from the gossips; but he was known to be hand in glove with the miller, and was accordingly credited with a first-hand knowledge of the great topic of the day. Am Ende was quite equal to the occasion. The moment he knew the part he was expected to play he was ready to play it. Not a parliamentary whip, not a political manager during a party crisis, not a great caucus organizer conducting an extra-parliamentary agitation in the streets could have carried himself with a finer air of secret and weighty knowledge. He talked incessantly, but less with his tongue than with his hands and eyes and feet. He gave a kick with his foot, after some one had made the announcement that Balthasar and Ruth were not to be married for a year, and the assembled company knew in an instant that the statement was moonshine; three months was nearer the mark than a year. An hour later half a dozen were prepared to swear that Am Ende had said there would be a wedding in three months. He had literally kicked it into them—nothing else. The foot, however, for the purposes of speech is a clumsy stammerer compared with the nimble subtlety and dexterity of hand and eye. Am Ende gave names, dates, and places; spun yarns, propounded theories, contradicted statements, and covered in-

numerable suggestions and suggestors with beautiful ridicule—and this without the aid of half a dozen words. He thought the best place for his tongue was in his cheek. Words were dangerous things, and the miller was a dangerous man, reflected Am the wise.

The sage, with spirits a little elevated, was making anything but a bee-line—though when the Yankees call a straight line a bee-line one wonders if they ever watched the line of a bee's flight—from the Nag's Head to the bridge, when he met Christopher Kneebone. Though Am Ende was born in sin and shapen in impudence, it was a sign that he was considerably market pert, and superior to the ordinary facts of life, when he accosted Kneebone with, "Happen you're glad o' th' news, blacksmith, being the miller's buzzum friend?"

"Let me see. I guess we have met before, and it wasn't in the daylight either," said Kneebone, in a significant tone.

Am Ende's jaw dropped suddenly, and he had a sensation on the top of his head as if the red bristles that grew thereon were slowly erecting themselves. A ghastly grin of terror overspread his cadaverous countenance. "Happen you're mistook, guvner?" he said abjectly.

"Possibly; but I thought I recognized your voice. However, that can wait. What's the news?"

"It's common talk that Gentleman Phythian is courtin' the miller's girl, Ruth."

"What! Phythian of the Chase?"

Am Ende gave a nod.

"It is something new then, is it?"

"Well, it's noo to them as hasna heard it afore. Lord! she'll be a tiptop leddy, and no great friend of mine neither. Some folks get their deserts and go down, and some dunno get their deserts and go up. And good-day to you, sir."

Am Ende held his way to the bridge, while Kneebone walked slowly up the hill to the smithy, revolving in his mind Am Ende's curious doctrine that they only who "go down" get their deserts. For a blacksmith and an Englishman, Kneebone was oddly fond of ideas. The ordinary blacksmith has no more use for ideas than for Greek roots. A more uninventive, unimaginative craftsman does not exist; yet there are few crafts in which a little invention, and a little imagination, and an occasional idea would show to better advantage. Abel was busy with the tire of a new wheel, under the elm-tree, when Kneebone came up.

"Abel, lad, leave the work alone a bit and come inside. I want to have a word or two with you," said Kneebone, passing

into the shop. He went to the far end and sat down on a three-legged stool. What would Jack Wragg have said if he had only known? He would have cried, with his incomparable irony, "Nay, mon, a three-legged stoo' is a poor weak thing. Nothing like a arm-cheer an' a sofy for a smith's shop." And, indeed, there were times when Kneebone felt so played out that he did actually drop work and go into the house and lie down on the "sofy." But this was a secret known only to Abel, and guarded from the Voese as a shameful thing.

"Have you heard the news?" asked Kneebone, as Abel came and leaned against a pair of old bellows close by him.

"No. I've asked no one, and no one has told me. I've been too busy to find out."

"Perhaps it's as well you were. Can you trust me with a secret, lad?"

"What secret?"

"Isn't there something going on between you and your cousin Ruth?"

Abel gave a start, and the blood rushed into his face. "Do you mean it's out, then?" he asked, in a low voice that sounded almost fierce.

"Nay, nay, not that. You are off the track, lad. As I gather, what they are talking about is that Gentleman Phythian, as they call him, is in love with the miller's daughter and is courting her."

CHAPTER XVI

A NATURALIST ON SPOOKS

ABEL laughed aloud.

"You don't believe it, I see."

"No, not quite. They've stuffed you this time, and no mistake!"

"If they have fooled me it is only because they are fooled themselves. I learned it from Am Ende just now. It's what they are all talking about."

A frown showed itself on Abel's face for a moment or two, but it vanished as he broke out in laughter again.

"What are you laughing at, lad?" inquired Kneebone, who had never heard Abel laugh before to-day.

"Laugh? It's enough to make an owl laugh. When Mr. Phythian wants a wife, I'm thinking it won't be Ruth Boden he'll seek. For me, now, a village blacksmith, it would be quite a lift to marry the daughter of a rich miller. In a sense, and in a way, Ruth is a lady. I mean, she has been well educated and is the opposite of a vulgar girl. But she is no lady in the sense that Miss Phythian is. Gentles mate with gentles. It skills not a brass button how fine a girl she may be, Balthasar Phythian looks at no Voe girl."

"I know precious little of the gentleman; but I opine from what you say that he's a donkey."

"If he's a donkey I've no ambition to be a horse."

"Is that so? I guess, then, he has looked at Ruth Boden. And when he was looking, like as not he forgot all about Balthasar Phythian and thought only of Ruth Boden. I've seen her, you know. She is not a beauty, but she has a face and figure and carriage that would be quite able to bowl over a mature bachelor who was no donkey, and was willing and perhaps waiting to be bowled over. I've seen a lot of the world, lad; and what would strike Voe as being a nine-days' wonder would be thought nothing of in the big world."

Abel made no answer, only laughed louder than ever. Kneebone watched him, and his face grew serious.

"You haven't said whether you could trust me with a secret yet, lad."

"Oh, yes, I can trust you, Mr. Kneebone; but remember it is a secret, and one which would bring no end of trouble if it got out."

"My lad, I've heard a lot of secrets in my time. Some of them would make you open your eyes, and others would make your heart grow sick. Talk about novels and romances, lad—not but what I'm desperate fond of a good story—but novels, lad, they're milk and water, skim-milk and water, compared with the true tales of life. But there! that can wait. You love her, do you?"

"With all my body and with all my soul!"

"Well done, lad! That's an answer worthy of a king. She loves you ditto?"

"I believe she would say so. Anyway, I believe it of her."

"You don't doubt her a bit?"

"Not an atom."

"Suppose Mr. Phythian did really make her an offer, what do you think she would do?"

"I don't know. I never thought of such a thing. But she would say no, of course."

"And the miller?"

"He would jump at it like a fish at a fly."

"Then he would want to know why she said the gentleman nay, wouldn't he?"

"Yes, if he knew of it."

"And he would know of it if Mr. Phythian were the suitor. Would she tell the miller her reason?"

"Tell the miller? If he guessed she even spoke to me he would shut her up in her room and keep her on bread and water for a twelvemonth. He hates me, without a cause," said Abel, with a deep sigh. He always sighed when he thought of the miller and his hate.

"Well, happen it isn't altogether without a cause. Seeking for causes, lad, you mustn't run along the grass. They are the roots of things, and they are apt to lie deep down, deeper than we can get with pick and spade. But, my lad, where there's smoke there's fire; and there's a lot of smoke about just now. Take my advice: waste no time, but see your lass as soon as you can, and just find out for yourself what's the meaning of all this gossip and chatter. There is something in the wind, you may be pretty sure. Maybe she's on bread and water this blessed minute."

At this Abel gave a start.

"Of course you've got a carrier-pigeon to act as postman or woman for you two?"

"Yes, I can generally get word to her."

"Then you had better go and throw the bird up without delay."

So Abel turned down his sleeves, put on his coat, and went out. Across the road, leaning against an orchard gate, was Am Ende, in conversation with Silas Chalk. Before Abel came up to them they parted, Chalk crossing some meadows in the direction of a distant coppice, with a couple of dogs at his heels. Am Ende, with his back to the road, leaned over the gate and gave his whole attention to the retreating figure of the under-keeper and the frolicking of his dogs.

A little distance below the smithery was a steep sandy lane, that crossed the brow of the hill and finally opened out on to a wide expanse of rolling ground, grass-covered, with jutting gray rocks, patches of heather, furze, and full of curious dips and hollows, and corresponding humps and hillocks. At the top of the lane, on the edge of the uplands, trim and snug in the centre of a garden, stood a small cottage, one-half of which seemed covered with honeysuckle as yet fast asleep, while the other half had been taken possession of by the quick climber yclept the Ramping Widow, whose myriad yellow eyes were already open. At the far end of the garden were kennels for the accommodation of ten or a dozen dogs. Only about half of them were occupied just now, but their occupants, healthy young sporting-dogs—although not "matched in mouth like bells each under each"—spent their mouths from sunrise to sunset in cries tunable enough at a distance. Here lived Violet Chalk. She was baking bread, and had just put the first two loaves into the oven, when of a sudden she stood in a listening attitude in the middle of the room. It was early, by a fortnight, for the cuckoo, who was, moreover, a shy bird, giving the open uplands a wide berth, being fond of thicket privacy and woodland shelter. Yet close at hand, as it were in the lane, she heard the unmistakable cry of the cuckoo.

"No, it can't be. Happen it's young Abel," murmured the woman, as the bird's notes came for the third time, true to the life. She unhung from the wall an old sunburnt billy-cock hat of her husband's. Of velveteen, its original shade of light buff had changed into a deep amber. Putting it jauntily on her head, she went out and down the garden walk to the wicket-gate. Her arms were bare; her dress was turned up in front and pinned behind; her white apron was tucked up on one side. She wore a pretty pink-and-gray striped underskirt, short enough to show her shapely ankles. With her amber-colored hat, and her bright eyes, and her handsome face, and

her picturesque "get-up," she made a pretty figure as she leaned over the gate and looked down the lane. Close to her, by the hedge of budding thorn that bounded the garden, was Abel Boden. Violet Chalk laughed as she said:

"I reckoned it was a cuckoo that couldn't fly who'd make a call in this lane. What's the meaning of your long face?"

"I must see Ruth this evening," answered Abel, very seriously.

"Heigho! then you've heard the silly gossip, I judge?"

"Yes; and I must know what it means."

"Means? Moonshine! I heard it yesterday morning, and do you think if it hadn't been moonshine I shouldn't have been down at the mill in no time? But there! you men are all alike. You think a woman isn't to be trusted farther than you can see her. There's my man. If he only knew you were here talking with me all alone like this he'd crack his skin with jealousy. If you got your deservings, there's precious few of you would have the chance of calling a woman your own. How did you know Silas wasn't at home?"

"I saw him going toward the bear coppice as I came along."

"Well, I'm glad your boldness didn't shame your wit. When you want to see me, don't you ever forget that you've got a brother in jealousy, and his name is Silas Chalk."

"You shall never suffer through me, Violet. And as for thanking you for your kindness to me and Ruth, I——"

"Nay, I want no thanks. If I couldn't stand by Miss Ruthie at a time like this, I should think myself a mighty poor stick. I've got some loaves a-baking now, and when they're done I'll just put on my things and run down and—listen! there's somebody—there! I just saw his head. To the top of the lane; quick, and see who it is!" exclaimed Violet Chalk, giving Abel a push with her hand.

Abel was off like a deer. A hundred yards or so brought him to the top of the lane that dipped steeply into the village. Between the high banks on either side he could see half the entire length of the lane. There was a well-known hawker with his donkey and panniers just heaving in sight. Otherwise the lane was deserted.

Abel came back smiling.

"There's the peddler of Swaffwick and his ass, almost at the bottom. There's nobody else about."

"Happen eyes and ears both lied, but I doubt it. If it wasn't Silas I don't care; and if it was, I—don't care either. You'd better go now. If I don't pass the smithy you'll know it's all right. She will want to see Dame Betty Iperson this

e'entide, I judge," said Violet Chalk, laughing, as she turned and went toward the house with the carriage of a chastened coquette. In about an hour she left the cottage and went down Tyntack Lane, bound for the mill on the other side of the river. There was a stone cowshed near a gate, about half-way down the lane. As she passed the gate a man peered at her for a moment through a large vent-hole in the shed. A minute or two elapsed, and then Am Ende issued from the cowshed, and crossing the field climbed to the summit of a bold head of land, that was crowned with some fine red-boled pines. Thence he could see the length of Tyntack Lane, and the Voe road down the hill and across the Scarthin, and the lane beyond that led to the mill. One of the mill ricks was partly visible, and the blue smoke from the homestead curling upward among the dark pines that covered the whole side of the hill. Am Ende seated himself with his back to a large stone, lighted his pipe, and smoked leisurely, keeping his glance all the time on the figure of Violet Chalk, until he saw it turn up the lane to the mill, when it was hidden by the trees. Presently he put his pipe carefully down, curled himself up in the sunshine, and went fast asleep.

Dame Betty Iperson has very little to do with our present narrative, touching it incidentally once or twice only. But no chronicler of Voe and the Voese may so much as mention her name without halting for a moment to do her reverence, for she was of unknown antiquity—probably as old as the oldest annuitant on the military pension-list. Her mother was a gypsy, her father was a charcoal-burner, and she was born some time subsequent to the Norman Conquest, on the top of a hill on the edge of a wood. There was no house on the hill-top, or barn or cowshed; but there was a kindly yew-tree, with mighty, drooping branches—one of those single-roomed palaces wherein primeval kings ate and drank, held court and war-council, and cultivated the royal taste for noble architecture. Under this tree was Betty born, and under it she lived for the space of fifty years. Then she fell deadly sick, and so was manageable. The old squire took her from under her own roof-tree and put her in a wee nest of a cottage at the foot of the hill, between the wood and the river. But Betty would have gone back again to her dear tree, in spite of all the old squire could do, had not nature come to his assistance and tamed her with the cruel cords of rheumatism.

She was a pensioner when the present squire was born; she

was a pensioner still. Nobody ever thought she would die. She was a white witch, and could do a thing or two better left unsaid. To evil-doers and urchins she was a terror, and honest folk also paid her a fearful respect. Yet, because her craft was white and levelled only against evil-doers, the popular sentiment concerning her was charitable and kind. She was the wise woman of Voe, and many a fortune she had told, good and bad alike, had come true. She knew the properties of plants and their relations to bodily ailments, and had cured more than the doctors—there were two of them—who came to Voe had killed. Yet folk were shy of visiting, especially alone, the old, old woman of mysterious powers, whom death itself passed by. Not so, however, Ruth, who seldom allowed a week to go by without paying Betty a visit, and never went empty-handed. Eggs, butter, cream, custards, tea, new bread, and tea-cakes all found their way into Ruth's dainty basket of blue and red and white and yellow Chinese straw. A dozen times had the old sibyl, "bow-bent with crooked age," tried to presage Ruth's future; but, oddly enough, she always failed. Always she got to:

"Ye will be woo'd by a gentleman well-born and wealthy, but——" and there she stuck.

"Go on, Betty. But what?" urged Ruth, time and again.

"Nay, nay, childie; happen there's summat wrong. He's a gentleman well-born and wealthy, and he'll woo thee honestly, and ye two ought to mate; but I canna see it, I canna see it, childie. *And I wunna see aught else,*" muttered Betty, with determination. If she could not shape destiny, she could at least ignore it.

The after-glow of the setting sun had paled into delicate shades of pink, rose-color, green, and nameless tints of ineffable sweetness and softness, when Ruth set out from the mill with some butter in her basket for Dame Betty, whose cottage was a good mile away. Ruth always went by the footpath that followed the course of the Scarthin within a stone's throw. First came two or three meadows of extreme fertility, being often flooded, then the path left the river-bank, and running to the left entered the wood and kept pretty close to the boundary wall most of the way. Between the wall and the river was a long, narrow strip of grass-land the length of the wood. There was something in the grass that made it specially toothsome to sheep at lambing-time. In the same season the Scarthin had a trick of rising suddenly in the night until it covered all the ground and washed against the boundary wall. In the

morning mutton was scarce and lamb scarcer; and four-footed Rachels, with bedraggled and bedrenched fleeces, stood making melancholy sounds, and would not be comforted.

Through the openings in the bushes Ruth could see the lambs as she went along. Once or twice she went to the wall and stood and watched them. She was fond of lambs, as all good girls are, and in her time had been the happy possessor and tormentor of several pets; but of late years she had observed and deplored the fact that lamb nature had undergone a great and sad change. It was no longer sportive and frolicsome, given to standing on its head and jumping all-fours, as it was in the old time, when her early picture-books were first made. If Ruth had only known that the Scotch gillie had lost his dry humor, and the Irish carle his merry wit, she might have wondered less at the mighty influence of the nineteenth century as displayed in the wiser but sadder lamb.

Ruth seemed in no haste to get to the end of her journey. She stopped to look at the lambs, to admire the milch-cows, to gather wild flowers, to examine buds, mosses, trees, and rocks; also the industrious ants delayed her, and the conies feeding in the open glades. And always she was looking behind her, and listening for Abel's footstep or one of his many imitative bird-notes. Across the river, in the open, the eventide had deepened into twilight, which still lingered on the path; but darkness was gathering quickly in the wood, and seemed to overhang her as the ground to her left rose abruptly into a steep pine-clothed hill. "He will meet me coming back," murmured the girl to herself, quickening her steps.

Suddenly a slight sound from the wood caught her ears, which caused her to turn her head quickly; and then she stood stock-still and gasped, "Oh! oh!" Not more than twenty feet from the path, with its root on a level with her head, was the slanting trunk of a large oak-tree, centuries old. All its boughs had dropped off long ago, yet the gray and gnarled monster, covered with big bosses, was not dead. It was not much more than a shell, but it fought off death with fine courage, and every year threw out its challenge of slender green twigs on its highest top. There was a hole in its trunk larger than a man's head. Ruth was looking at this aperture when she was affrighted and cried, "Oh! oh!" for there in the uncertain light she beheld a hideous human face. Its gleaming eyes looked out from a mass of savage flame-colored hair that covered the upper part of the face. Its mouth was wide open, and its tongue lolled out in horrible derision. Fascinated with horror, Ruth stood for some moments gazing at it with

parted lips and dilated eyes. Then she dropped her basket, screamed out "Abel! Abel!" and fled like a wild thing back toward home. And toward her came Abel, fast as he could tear. He was some distance off when that cry of "Abel! Abel!" rang through the wood. In an instant he knew it was Ruth, and his heart gave a great sickening throb. He put his hands to his mouth, and all his breath went out in a fierce and weird-sounding owl-cry, that Ruth may know he was at hand. Then he rushed forward like the wind. He saw her coming, halted, opened his arms, and folded them round her. Then he glared about like an angry bull, but no enemy loomed in sight.

"My darling, my darling! what is it? Speak! What made you cry out?" he murmured, stroking the head of the sobbing and trembling girl.

"O Abel, don't leave me! It was horrible!—horrible!"

"What was it? Somebody dead in the way—a murder?"

"No; it was in the big oak—a hideous face lolling its tongue at me through the hole there. Take me home, love, I feel faint."

"Nay, sweet; we're nigh the spring. Come and drink; it will revive you."

He led her to a spring with a wooden trough, that looked by daylight like a natural channel, so coated was it inside and out with exquisite greenery, summer and winter through. Ruth drank of the cold crystal fluid, and decided not to faint.

"Where's your basket?" asked Abel.

Ruth looked at her hands in a helpless, perplexed fashion. "I don't know. I suppose I dropped it."

"Then come along, and we will go and find it." But Ruth hung back.

Abel laughed lightly, and said, "You little coward! I am going to have a look at the big oak. I'm thinking there was nothing but your startled fancy."

"It will have gone, whatever it was, by now," objected Ruth, shuddering.

"Happen it will, but I shall know when I get there whether bird or beast or man has been there this evening. If nothing has been there, why, then, it was nothing but a—a spook, as Mr. Kneebone calls it. He means a boggart, you know."

"A boggart's bad enough, Abel," said Ruth, with due solemnity.

"A spook, sweetheart, is just what you care to make it. It may be a goblin, a ghost, a devil, an angel, a natural object distorted by your fear, a play of the fancy, a trick of the eye. Sweetheart, I've roamed all this country, woods and valleys,

fields and moors, as you know, at all hours of the night; and I've seen dozens of spooks, and I—I don't take much stock in them. They're a set of beggarly impostors. And I'm thinking you've seen one of the gentry to-night."

"I will go," said Ruth, her natural courage reviving under the breath of Abel's brave scorn. In a few minutes they were opposite the big oak.

"Ha! here is my basket," cried Ruth, stooping to pick it up.

"That's right. Now for the tree. I can hardly see the hole now, Ruth."

"It has grown so dark up there," whispered Ruth, clinging tightly to her lover's arm.

"Never mind; I know exactly where it is. If I can't see I can feel and smell. We'll soon settle this mystery," said Abel, going toward the tree.

CHAPTER XVII

A CANDLE-END AND A PAIR OF EYES

"You had better stand here. I shan't be more than a minute or two," said Abel, as they stood at the foot of the oak.

"Where are you going?" inquired Ruth, in a low, frightened voice.

"Oh, not far; only up the tree. It's hollow, you know, inside; and I shall get in from the top. Luckily, it has a good slant, so that I can crawl along without dropping from top to bottom."

"Suppose—IT—should be inside now!" gasped Ruth.

"In that case one of us will come out quicker than he went in. Happen it won't be me either."

"O Abel! if it's there, it's listening, and knows you are coming! And I'm sure it wouldn't stick at murder. Oh, don't risk it! Do let us go away."

Abel laughed out. "Go away from a spook? Nay, nay, sweetheart. If I once began giving in to them they'd haunt me without end, hunt me out of the woods, turn my hair white, and drive me crazy. Run from them, and they are wild bulls or ravening wolves; face them, and they are sheep—nay, geese. The only boggart I ever came across that stood his ground when faced was an old gray jackass. Kiss me; you are my lass, and I would have you a brave one."

"Forgive me, love. I will be brave. Now go, but be careful," whispered Ruth, putting her mouth up for a kiss.

Then Abel vanished round the tree, and Ruth stood alone in the darkness. She was brave now. Maybe Abel would soon be in great peril, in deadly conflict, and would need all the help she could give him. Could she help him, if need were? What a silly question! Help him! Her arms were strong, her fingers steel, her nails weapons—fine-tempered weapons of war, that would hold their own against eagle's talons or tiger's claws. Woe to the man or beast or boggart on whom she fell foul in defence of Abel! Perfectly cool, splendidly brave, she stood in an alert attitude, with clinched hands, parted lips, and eyes that would have sparkled had it not been so dark.

She heard Abel climbing the huge trunk nimbly as a wild-cat. Then he entered its black, cavernous mouth, and every sound ceased. It seemed as if the earth had swallowed him up alive.

Stood Ruth, breathless, expecting every instant to hear some awful groan, or shriek, or cry for help. The moments were minutes, and the minutes hours; still, all was silent as the grave. She put her ear to the tree and listened—not a sound. Perhaps there had been a struggle, and she had not heard it. Perhaps he was already dead. Who could tell what was at the bottom of the tree? Possibly a bottomless hole; even the entrance to a cave where bad men assembled! You see, her imagination was getting the bit between its teeth. "I will go to him," she said aloud; and her voice had that ring in it which sends a thrill through one—the divine accent of womanly heroism. She took a step forward. Just then a lighted match burned brilliantly above her head, in the opening through which the face of the satyr had shown itself.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?" It was Abel's voice, thank God!

"Yes, love, yes, love! Shall you be long?"

"I am coming now."

Ere she could count a hundred, Abel was beside her. He took her hand, saying, "Come along, sweetheart. The sooner you're at home the better."

They regained the path, now cloaked in darkness like the wood, and moved toward Voe, which was down the river, in lover-like fashion. For a little distance nothing was said. Abel seemed disinclined to talk, and Ruth felt a wee bit afraid of learning the truth. Questionless Mother Eve herself felt a wee bit afraid of learning the truth about that mysterious tree that bore the brightest fruit in all Eden; but she ate nevertheless.

Said Ruth, "What did you find, dearest? Was it a spook?"

"No, sweet; I'm thinking it was no spook."

"What is it, Abel? Tell me why you speak in that voice!"

"I didn't know anything was wrong with my voice. There was nobody there, though it hasn't been empty all winter. Mice have been in it, and squirrels and bats, and——"

"Don't, Abel, please! You are putting me off. Tell me what it was."

"A man," said Abel, bluntly and almost savagely.

"A man! Oh! what does it mean?"

"That's what I can't make out."

"Perhaps it was a tramp?"

"Didn't you know it at all, Ruth—the face, I mean?"

"No; it looked too horrible for a man's face."

"Because you were frightened, sweet. The knave! If I had him by the two ears only! Try and think: picture the face with the hair brushed away; push in that lolling tongue; shut the mouth, and lower the chin a good bit—for I'm thinking the head was thrown back for effect. If it wasn't so dark I'd show you what I mean."

"Don't talk like that, dear one; it gives me the shivers. You could never look like that monster."

"I'm none so sure of that. But do as I tell you, and see if you don't conjure up a face you know."

For four hundred and eleven paces—Abel counted them—there was silence between the two; then Ruth suddenly gave a slight start. Abel felt it, for his arm was round her waist.

"Well?" he said.

"I'm not sure, but I fancy it reminds me of—no, I won't. It is not fair. It's only a fancy, and because I don't like him."

"Never mind; I'll christen him for you. I don't know who or what peered out upon you, but I know who has been in the big oak to-night."

"Who?" whispered Ruth.

"Am Ende. And happen if he doesn't am-end he'll come to a rope's-end soon," replied Abel, like Samson of old, running his wrath into grim humor.

"Are you sure it was Am Ende?"

"Yes; I'm as sure about it as if I'd seen him there with my own eyes."

"Tell me about it, Abel, won't you?"

"Well, I went down inside very carefully, so as not to disturb things. The first thing I found inside was a smell of tobacco. Now, spooks don't smoke, or at least I never heard say that they did; but Am Ende does."

"And plenty of other men, too."

"I know, but never mind them now. My case against Am Ende is made up like a chain of a number of links. Separate, they are nothing; hung together, and happen the like of them are what hang most men."

"I see now, dearest. Link one: a smoker has been in the big oak, and Am Ende smokes. Go on, love."

"I had my match-box on me, of course; and as luck would have it, there was a candle-end in it as usual. I got a light and went to work. I found where the fellow sat down when he filled his pipe, smoked it out, and knocked out the ashes. When he pulled his tobacco out of his trousers-pocket he pulled out at the same time some grains of wheat and barley and oats.

I know our friend carries his tobacco in his trousers-pocket; I've seen him pull it out. He's nearly always chewing grain of some sort or other, and I'd bet a thousand to one he carries it in the same pocket as his tobacco. Outside of the mill, how many men in the place would have a grain of corn in their pockets if they were searched through to-night?"

"Link two: grains of corn dropped from the pocket," quoth Ruth.

Abel laughed as he said, "Link three I didn't find, because my light was giving out; but it is there to a certainty. With a good light I shall find here and there bits of fine flour-dust off his clothes. Shall we count it?"

"I think not. It would be hardly fair."

"As you like. The ground at the bottom was clayey and not over dry. There were lots of footmarks; boots with big nails in them, not much unlike my own. The print of the right foot was perfect in half a dozen places. But there wasn't a single perfect print of the left foot to be found. Always the heel was defective. Now and then there was a trace of it, but mostly there was no heel to the print of the left foot."

"That looks bad."

"Very bad, when we remember that the miller's man has got a catch in his left foot, and never leaves the mark of his heel behind him."

"Link three: left-heel mark unsatisfactory."

"The scamp, to frighten you, brought his thick crop of red bristles over the front of his face. I don't suppose he had a comb; he used his hands. Close to the hole where you saw him a nasty, cruel spike of wood sticks out. Against it I bumped my head pretty hard. That seemed to say, if I can catch one, I can catch two. Just then my candle died out. You saw the match near the opening? Well, it showed me two human hairs. I've got them both safe enough, and their color is——"

"Red?"

"Yes—a lovely fiery red."

"Link four: two red hairs."

"That is all. The chain is short, but don't you think it would bear the weight of our friend Am Ende?"

"O Abel, what does it mean?"

Abel sighed and shook his head. It was too dark to see his head, but Ruth interpreted his sigh.

"He must have heard me call your name!"

"Unless he has grown suddenly deaf he must have done. But what brought him in the big oak? How came he to dare to do such a thing to you? The whole thing is a puzzle to me.

Happen Mr. Kneebone will see through it, if I have a talk with him about it."

"Abel, this might be our last walk together," said Ruth, with a suddenness very well calculated to surprise her lover.

"Ha! how's that?" asked Abel, coming to a halt. He was thinking now of what he had almost forgotten in the excitement of the last forty minutes—to wit, the object of his meeting with Ruth.

"I can't help thinking that Am Ende is spying on us. Anyway, he knows enough now to rouse father, if he tells him."

"Odd way of spying—to put your head out of a hole and make faces at one! As for telling your father, I don't think he will, this time at any rate. I reckon you frightened him almost as much as he did you, by the way you screamed. But what if he did? Your father will have to learn the truth some day."

"Yes; but not now. I don't know what he would do to me just now. I think he——"

"Ruth, why I wanted to see you to-night was to ask you—something. There's a report in everybody's mouth about you and Mr. Phythian of the Chase."

There was a pause of some length ere Ruth replied, "Yes, I know. Violet Chalk told me to-day. I never dreamt it was out. I think I feel it more for him than for myself."

"Oh, indeed!" said Abel, in a low tone; and his arm fell from Ruth's waist as if it had been suddenly paralyzed.

"Don't take your—I mean, don't wrong me, my love, even for a moment, by thinking me untrue to you! O Abel! could you doubt me now?"

"I have not said I doubted you. I think you owe me an explanation. One woman is only half enough for two men. I'll share with none—gentleman or clo——"

Ruth's hand was on his mouth, and then her lips; and between her sweet honey-dew kisses she murmured:

"And I know one woman who will share only with one man, though he is quick to doubt her when he ought to know she would——" (a long, sweet, clinging, passionate kiss) "die for him!"

She put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him lightly and quickly back from her. It was a woman's repulse all over, a piece of sweet and delicately wanton irony. Only a fool would have misunderstood it to mean, "Go." It meant—it always means—"Take me in your arms, if you dare, you—you—sweet—monster!"

Abel felt very much inclined to accept the dainty challenge, but he restrained himself. He had yet to hear what was the

meaning of the village gossip; but whatever it was, it left Ruth's loyalty intact—of that, he had now not the smallest doubt. Nevertheless, Abel had an instinctive knowledge of the fact that as there is a certain natural propriety that attaches to every conceivable situation in life, so every quarrel has its inalienable etiquette, and every reconciliation its proper punctilio. The Phythian rumor touched to the quick the honor of both himself and Ruth; and to give way to his impulse, and meet her sweet defiance with a lover's arms before he had heard her formal statement, was to violate the true instinct of conduct. This sounds oddly precise—almost priggish. But Abel was no prig. Only his instinct along certain lines was as fine and accurate as were his organs of sight and touch and smell. Abel took her hand, and as they moved on he said:

"Sweetheart, if I had any doubt, you have driven it all off; and I'll see that it keeps off in future. It isn't a pleasant thing, though, for a man to know that everybody is talking about his sweetheart being courted by some other man. To be sure, they don't know you are my sweetheart."

"I was so hoping you would not hear a word about it. Some day in the future, when—when we were always together, love, I meant to tell you all about it. It is a curious story, Abel, and I am not sure whether I did right or wrong; but you won't blame me, darling, will you?"

"Nay, nay, sweet; why should I blame you?" His arm stole round her waist again as he spoke; whereat the girl was glad, and gave a little wriggle closer to him, full of love and gratitude, and gave him her lips for a moment.

"I will tell you everything as it happened," she murmured. And she kept her word, and told him everything as it had happened. When she had finished, Abel said:

"It is no mean chance, Ruth, that is offered you. I'm thinking that, hard as it would be, I have no good right to stand in your way. It isn't as though there was a prospect of our marrying soon."

"I can wait, darling. We are in no hurry to be married. As for you standing in my way, if we never saw each other again, the real obstacle would not be removed."

"What do you mean?"

"Only that you are my first, my true, my only love. Until that is killed, I am yours and yours only. My love is the blessed obstacle; and O Abel! what are twenty Mr. Phythians compared with you?"

"You darling! I will live only to make you happy," he murmured, as he clasped her in his arms. Here again his instinct of conduct was really admirable.

CHAPTER XVIII

A BUD OF MYSTERY

ONE evening, a few days later, Abel was just about to knock off work and go home, when his attention was arrested by the stamping of a horse in the adjoining shop, where the shoeing was done. He went and opened the top part of the door, which was cut in two, and looked in. A large fat mare, with a sleek, handsome hide of the color of a fine chestnut, turned her head and whinnied to him; then she bestowed her attention upon some hay in front of her.

"Why, Jessy, wench, what brings you here?" cried Abel, in a surprised tone. Then he turned away, and taking off his coat said to Kneebone, "I didn't know there was anything in there. When did she come?"

"Maybe an hour ago, when you were away. What are you after now?"

"To put on her shoes, to be sure. You don't think I'd go and leave the mare there all night?"

"Why not? She's got hay enough to last till morning, and I reckon the squire won't fret."

Abel gave a hearty laugh. "Well, I never! Fancy keeping a mare all night waiting to be shoe'd, and feeding her into the bargain! We should never hear the last of their chaff, if it got out. Besides, they'll be here for her soon. Who brought her?"

"Dick Poyser. I told him she'd be ready first thing in the morning. I guess he knew she would put up here for the night; he brought the hay with him."

"Well, if it is to be, it is to be. I shouldn't wonder if I go and dream about her all night, though."

"It isn't exactly the Jack Wragg way of doing things, eh?"

"Hardly. He would have thought it as strange as if you had brought him a cow to shoe," said Abel, laughing and putting on his coat again. He wished Kneebone good-day and left the smithery. A hundred yards away he turned as he heard Kneebone calling him.

Kneebone met him by the tree in front of the forge, and said, "Are you going to be busy to-night?"

"Not that I know of. Why?"

"Would you mind coming round here, say about eight?"

"All right! I'll come with pleasure. Happen I'd better not change my toggery, if there's any work to be done?"

"Thank you, lad. Happen you'd better not. Though I didn't say that I should want you to work. About eight o'clock, then," said Kneebone, with an odd look upon his face as he turned and entered the shop.

All the way home Abel found himself wondering what it was that Kneebone wanted him for. It was an unusual request to make; and this, taken in conjunction with his odd look, and the incident of Jessy—the finest cart-horse belonging to Squire Saxton—formed as neat a little bud of mystery as one would find on the prosaic hedge of circumstance in a day's ride. When Abel reached home, as usual he found tea ready waiting for him. There was no woman, young or old, in the little weird-looking cottage, built of tufa-stone, on the edge of the wood under the moor; and what was better, or worse, no woman, young or old, seemed to be needed there. A cleaner, neater cottage, inside and out, was not to be found in the parish; nor a more expert housekeeper than the old broom-maker, Nathan Wass. Eighty years of lonely bachelorhood had made him nimble and dexterous in those feminine arts and mysteries that are the admiration and despair of the spear-side of a properly constituted household. He could bake bread and boil potatoes better than nineteen-twentieths of the women of Voe. He could wash, starch, and iron, blacklead a grate and polish an oak chair until he could behold in them the color of his hair and the shape of his nose. He could sew and knit, he could make jams and jellies and pickles, and wines from the cowslip and the elderberry. He could brew a dish of tea fit for a Chinese mandarin to drink; could make delicious pikelets; and as for toast and butter, not a woman in Voe could hold a candle to him. In toast and butter the broom-maker was an ARTIST—in large type. It was no hardship to board and lodge with old Nathan. He took huge delight in training Abel in all the wise and subtle ways of housewifery.

"Happen, lad, thou art cut out for a lone life like me, and it's as well to know how to fend for yoursen. And if ye marry, it's just as well to know, when the wife goes astray, how to set her to rights. Nay, lad, get a fork to them taters, if ye'd have 'em floury. Beat 'em with a spoon, and they'll hang together like a lump of putty."

In this style the old man taught his pupil, and Socrates had not a better. Tea over and the things cleared away, Nathan

came and sat outside the cottage door and filled his little black pipe. The sun, a great red globe, lay right on the top of the steep, black-faced cliff in front.

"It looks as how it might come a-rolling down the cliff right on the top of us," observed Nathan, as Abel came out and stood leaning against the stone porch.

"Happen if we dug a hole for it to get through, it might take to coming down this side of the slope of an evening, instead of going down on the other side."

"A dangerous hole, lad, on a dark night."

"The thing to do would be to wait till the moon came down after the sun, and then as she popped in—board her."

"Happen there 'ud be no jumping-off place on the other side."

"Then I'd hang on and explore till she came round to the getting-on place again."

"Ha! well, he's gone now, and it'll soon be dark down here. A wonderful thing is the light, lad. I mind me that old Parson Gell said one Sunday in church—it's o'er fifty years sen, but it seems as if it might ha' been only last year. I've thought on it many and many's the time. A mighty scholard was the old parson! 'Twas said he knowed all that was in the books, and a nation lot beside. Says he—I remember of his words as well as if he'd spoke 'em on Sunday, and he's been dead this two-and-forty year, come next October. Says he:

"Friends, there are idols and idols, false gods and false gods. Not every idol has been base, not every false god has been wicked. Think of the sun in his strength—what a splendid idol! We are tempted to think there was something splendid in the character of the old Persians, who, being pagans, chose the sun as their god."

"Not a word, lad, have I heard about it sen, but it struck me like a flash of lightning when he said that folk once worshipped the sun as God. It's never been quite the same to me sen. Sometimes I'm a kind of sorry for him. Thinks I, *He's a dead God, and now Parson Gell is gone, no man minds it in Voe but me.* But there! why art standing, lad?" said Nathan in a peculiar low tone. He was not sure whether he had taken Abel along with him in sympathy, and was half ashamed of having unveiled the bright secret he had guarded for half a century.

"I must be starting soon. I'm going back to the smithy for a while. Mr. Kneebone wants me for something."

"Dost alleys Mister him, lad? Thou didstna use to Mister thy other master."

"Well, no. Jack Wragg was Jack Wragg. A very different kind of man to this one."

"A better workman, happen—eh?"

"Maybe he was; but he *was* a workman, and somehow Mr. Kneebone isn't."

"Thou dost the work and he looks on? But there! stick up for him, lad. He did the fair thing by thee. Dost get on well together?"

"Oh, yes! first-rate. I like him—more than I know why. There's something about him that wins a fellow. They are getting to know him and like him better in the village, too. It's no light job to stand in Jack Wragg's shoes, you know."

"Thou art right, lad. Jack Wragg was a sort of old institution, passed on from father to son; and everybody knowed everything about it. But this un is a sort of a new and strange invention; and how it'll work in the long run, the Lord only knows!" And Nathan shook his white poll dubiously.

"I'll bet on its working all right. If you doubt a man because he's a new-comer, you may as well think the world is going to the dogs because the old men are dying off and the young ones are coming to the front."

"And happen it is," replied Nathan, with an amused chuckle. "Hast learnt anything about his history?" he asked.

"No, next to nothing. He isn't a free talker about himself; and as far as I'm concerned he can take his own time. He is a good man, of that I'm sure; and I'm thinking I'm in luck to have him for my friend."

"He'll alleys have my good word, for one, lad. And if the parish axes me why, I'll say so much as this: furstly, he befriended thee, lad, like a man; and next, because, if rumor isna an out-and-out liar, thy uncle, the miller, hates him like pison. Lad, it's a hard thing to say of thy poor father's brother, but when I know of his hating a man I want no better rayson for being that man's friend. I'd as soon say it to his face as behind his back," cried the old man, sitting bolt up in his arm-chair, and frowning fiercely. A placid old lion was Nathan—genial, and apt to think pleasant thoughts and say pleasant things about most folks, always barring the miller. For him his word was always sharp and bitter, and full of undying antagonism.

"Let him be, Nathan, for my father's sake," said Abel quietly.

The old man sank back in his chair, and all his fierceness vanished in a moment. He knocked out the ashes from his half-smoked pipe, which had gone out, put in some fresh to-

bacco, and having started it going again he looked up at Abel and said:

"Hast heard the news about thy cousin Ruth?"

"Oh, yes! the place is full of it. What do you think about it, Nathan?"

"It's none o' my business, lad, or I might be minded to observe that print gown matched wi' broadcloth suits but ill."

"Happen you are right, in the main; but as far as Ruth Boden is concerned, she's good enough girl for any man's wife, peer or ploughman."

"I wouldna be the man to gainsay that, though it's little I know of her. It isna 'goodness' I'm thinking on, however. Th' barn-door fow's a better bird to my thinkin' than th' begemmed peacock; but they dunna mate. Like to like, says I; gentle wi' gentle, an' simple wi' simple."

"Well, there's nothing to fret about in this case. As it happens, it's all gammon—I mean Ruth isn't engaged to Mr. Phythian. Only don't go talking about it, please. I don't want you to know more about it than the general report goes."

"By the same token, thy wit outstrips the common talk—eh, lad?"

"Happen it does, but it's a secret."

"A secret, eh? And thou knowest it? Happen Gentleman Phythian whispered it in thy ear; or the maid hersen? Or, liker still, th' miller, thy loving uncle, tow'd thee!!! Lad, lad! which on us is it that's green, me or thee?" and Nathan shook his venerable head and smiled a superior smile.

The blood crept slowly into Abel's beautiful dark-skinned face, and he pulled his long mustache in a nervous manner. "I didn't know before that you thought me a braggart, Nathan," said Abel, after a silence of some length.

His voice, more than his words, caused Nathan to turn half round in his chair, so as to get a full view of his face.

"I'm no such a fool as to call *thee* a braggart, lad. If I wanted to lie about thee I wouldna go about it in that clumsy style. I'd get howd of a bit o' rayal truth that everybody, thysen into the bargain, knowed to be such; an' I'd twist it, lad, from a straight line into a sort o' corkscrew. Then I'd stick it into thee, and bore away until I'd a hole big enow to howd my fist. I didna mean to hurt thy feelings, lad. Thou knowst that well enow. It was on'y my stupid way of letting thee know that my eyes wunna carry through a stone wa'," said Nathan, slowly and with compunction in his tones.

"What's the stone wall?" inquired Abel.

"How come ye to know the ins and outs of this affair atwixt Gentleman Phythian and thy cousin? Happen it's on'y a mighty close hedge, and no stone wa' at all; but I canna see through it."

Abel laughed lightly, but said nothing. Presently he sighed deeply, but still said nothing. Nathan smoked on in silence, thinking his own thoughts, which wandered far and wide from the subject in hand; but he would come back again in a trice, when Abel was ready, and carry on the talk as if his mind had never left it.

"Nathan."

The old man looked up quickly and said, "Well, lad?"

"I am going to tell you a secret."

"By the same token, I'll keep it warm and dry for thee."

"Thank you. If I haven't told you before, it wasn't because I couldn't trust you. You know that, don't you?"

"It 'ud be a sore grief to me, lad, ever to think ye couldna trust me. I wouldna think it till ye tow'd me so yoursen; and certainly not because ye thought fit to housen thy own secret in thy own heart. I'm listening, lad."

"To begin, then, Mr. Phythian wanted to court my cousin Ruth, but she said him nay. Why she said him nay was a secret she dare not tell to the miller, who was set on her having Mr. Phythian. The upshot was, that she put the case before Mr. Phythian, who did his best to get her out of the difficulty. So now the miller thinks that the thing is working itself into ship-shape, and that there will soon follow a regular engagement, and probably a quick wedding. Happen he's counting his chickens before they're hatched. He's gone and given out that they are engaged to be married, or what amounts to the same thing, and that troubles me sore. It has put them both in a curious position—one that can't hold long, I'm thinking."

"And that troubles thee sore, eh?" inquired Nathan abruptly.

"Well, yes, it does."

"All right, lad! Go on."

But Abel stood fingering his mustache, and seemed in no haste to proceed with his narrative.

"Hast done, lad?" asked Nathan presently.

"Not quite. I may as well go on, though, I reckon, now I've begun. Could you guess why she refused Mr. Phythian?" said Abel.

"Happen I could, an I tried. I'd rather not try, though."

"She cares for—somebody else."

Another pause followed, broken at length by Nathan remarking, "I'm hearkening, lad."

"It's me, Nathan."

"What! thee lovest thy cousin Ruth?" cried Nathan, suddenly rising from his chair and staring at Abel in astonishment.

"Yes; and what's better, she cares for me. I thought it would surprise you."

"Surprise me, lad! It's naught to be glad on. It's summat to be ashamed on," cried Nathan, greatly excited.

"How's that?"

"Thou canst never marry her, lad—never! Hast never heard of the feud atwixt her father and thy own?"

"Happen it's time the breach was healed, Nathan. There's been enough damage done as it is."

"Happen again it isna in thy power to heal it, lad. Sen when has the miller ceased hatin' thee or thy poor father? If they met to-night the miller 'ud cuss him outen his sight. What 'ud thy poor father say if he knowed, dost think?"

"I don't know, Nathan. Would you have me think my father harbors hate and ill-will like the miller? If he ever comes back again, don't you think the first thing he will do will be to ask the miller to forgive him for throwing him down the quarry?"

"So in that affair thee thinkest thy father was in the wrong, dost?" inquired Nathan, his voice trembling with scorn and rage.

"I wish to heaven I could think otherwise."

"Oh, indeed! An' so thee takest sides agen thy father, it seems! Look here! When he turns up some day he will want to know who's had the training o' thee. Say! didst ever gather it from Nathan Wass that thy father was in the wrong?" demanded the old man, with contempt in every tone and gesture.

"Come, Nathan! don't let us quarrel, especially about my father," said Abel gently.

"Speak me yea or nay! Didst ever gather it from me that thy father was in the wrong?"

"No, indeed. You know that well enough; but others——"

"All right! He'll know then that I bain't to blame. Thou'st gathered the pison not from my plot."

"For the matter of that, I never heard any one say my father was in the wrong. They think he served the miller right. That's simply because they do not like the miller. I cannot go so far as that. Right or wrong as he may have been in the quarrel, when he threw the miller over the cliff my father was in the wrong. He might have killed him outright."

“Ei, ei, my lad! very fine raysoning! It’s the owd, owd story of a wench’s witchcraft. Thou ’udst rayson thy father out to be a murderer; and why? To excuse thy love of a wench! But atwixt thee and her there’s blood, lad; and ye canna cross it, either on ye. Thy poor dead father mun come back first. Yea, dally wi’ her on the sly; court and kiss her, and fool yersen wi’ pretty dreams; but ye wunna wed. Atwixt thee and her there’s BLOOD.” And Nathan turned into the cottage and left Abel standing alone

CHAPTER XIX

THE BUD OPENS

THE twilight had vanished, and under the elm in front of the smithery the gloom was so dense that when Abel came up he did not observe Kneebone, who was sitting on a bench against the tree, waiting for his arrival.

"You are a trifle late, aren't you?"

"Holloa! are you there? Yes, I'm afraid I am. I got talking with Nathan, and the time went by quicker than I thought for," answered Abel.

Kneebone wondered what made the lad's voice so sad.

"You didn't know that I was a thought-reader, did you?" he said, in his half-serious and half-ironical manner.

"No, I can't say that I did."

"Well, I am. Sometimes I can spell rather than read; but when the inspiration comes I can read off thought like print. I guess I'm inspired now."

"What makes you think so?" said Abel, almost languidly. He was scarcely in the mood for a jest.

"You have been talking about your father, and as usual the subject has given you a fit of the blues. Lad, when will you learn wisdom, and make a bargain with your silly tongue to reckon him for good and aye to be—unspeakable?"

A bitter laugh broke from Abel. "Which means," continued Kneebone, "that you intend to keep on thinking about him every day, and talking about him just as often as you feel like getting drunk on misery. I don't deny the pleasure there is in getting drunk on sorrow and woe. A good many folk tippie at it, and get a sort of happiness out of it. God knows I'm sorry for the poor things; but, lad, there's no mistake about it, they are fools for their pains. Don't you be one of them. If your father fretted about you, you would soon either see him or hear from him. If he's dead—well, blessed are the dead! But he's none dead; he is only counting on you being like him—a philosopher."

"Yes, I have played the philosopher to some purpose. Earned his curse, Nathan says."

"What's that you say? There, hold on a minute; I haven't done thought-reading yet. You have been talking with the patriarch about a—a certain phantom of delight, and he thinks if that precious father of yours only knew, he would empty a cartload of deep and strange curses upon you."

"He says there is blood between us—that we can never wed. I don't know what he means. I feel there is some mystery at the back of it; but I cannot think with Nathan. From all I have ever heard of my father, and of what happened on that terrible day, I feel sure he would rejoice that the feud didn't carry over to the children. It was not in him to dig an impassable gulf of hate. I am his son. I have his very being in me. I have watched myself for years, day and night, to discover what in me was native to him and what was foreign to him. And I say solemnly I do not believe that it was in him to frown on our love for each other. Yet Nathan says there is blood between us."

There followed silence. In the darkness they could not see a feature of each other's face; yet both men were tingling with emotion. Their hands went out, and met in a strong clasp for a few seconds. Then they drew apart.

Said Kneebone, in the same equivocal manner as before, save that his voice was a trifle shaky, "I guess I will have a talk with the patriarch, and let him see the difference between an inspired man and himself. Happen I'll teach him to read thought; and then I'll wager a thousand to one he will agree with me that the chances are that the father speaks in the accents of the son. We will go into the shop now, lad."

They went in, and while Abel lighted a couple of lamps, often needed in the winter season, Kneebone closed the large doors and fastened them on the inside. The yellow smoky glare of the lamps did little else than make visible the darkness which lurked round the narrow circles of dim radiance and curled itself up in a thick cloud among the naked rafters of the lofty roof. As through a mist Abel saw his companion take off his coat and roll up his shirt-sleeves. He evidently meant work; so Abel followed his example as to coat and sleeves, and put on his leather apron.

"Those lamps don't understand their business, but perhaps if we took them in hand a bit they might learn it. I'll try the fire." Saying which, Kneebone went to the huge bellows, and taking in both hands the beautifully polished ox-horn that formed the end of the long handle he began to blow with a steady downward pressure and with no bending of the back. And no magician with his wand ever wrought a more wonderful

effect than did the blacksmith of Voe with that long wooden pole tipped with horn; for as it moved up and down, the familiar yet ever-mysterious spirit of heat and light issued from its secret hiding-place, and unveiled its fiery splendor until the rude and grimy smithy glowed like a temple with the reflected glory of its god.

The world has seen the time when Kneebone with his bellows and his furnace would have formed the sublime and mysterious centre-piece of a national act of worship; when the wisdom and the worth of the race would have gazed in solemn awe and fearful delight at the man who could evoke a thing so strange, so lovely, and so masterful as the spirit of the flame. If it were not such a silly thing to do, and the doing of which would expose us to the claws of the gentle and wise creature who dwells "on the top of a snowy mountain in Nova Zembla," we should like to ask, for the sake of information, whether or not in this current year of grace the fire spirit keeps its ancient heart of mystery, as it has kept its godlike purity of face? Because, if the wonder still remains, it seems a pity that we have lost the faculty of wonder, and can no longer say, with the old knightly physician of Norwich town, 'I love to lose myself in a mystery, to pursue my reason to an *O! Altitudo!*

The furnace soon began to glow and send out flames that lit up the smithery from ground to roof. Abel sat on the anvil watching Kneebone, who presently ceased blowing and leaned against the bellows, with his hands in his pockets, and looked with an amused expression of countenance at Abel.

"I suppose Jack Wragg was a first-rate hand at his work, from all I hear," observed Kneebone.

"He ought to have been, at any rate. Father, grandfather, great-grandfather, great-great-grandfather, great-great-great-grandfather—all were Jack Wraggs, and every one of them a smith. Jack took to it like a duck to water. At the agricultural show they give prizes for shoeing. When it was first started, Jack went in, and, for five years running, he won the first prize. Nobody could stand against him. The fifth year found only one smith in all Peakshire who would compete with him. After that some gentleman came to see him privately, and told him that they were all very proud of him, and thought the world of his skill, but he mustn't compete any more; if he did, they would have to give up the competition altogether. Next year the placards announced that the competition was open to all in the county—'Except Mr. John Wragg of Voe, the champion blacksmith of Peakshire.' Jack was mighty pleased; all the same, he was

angry, especially at their printing him as 'Mr. John Wragg.' Said he: 'They've gone an' put a mask on to me face, the blackguards! I'm no John; I was christened Jack, like me forbears afore me for as many generations as I've fingers o' me right hand. Can any good Christen tell me wheer a Mr. John Wragg of Voe lives? Oh, the blackguards, to go an' ca' a man names like that!'"

Abel mimicked Jack Wragg's manner and tone capitally.

Kneebone laughed aloud. Then he said: "Did I dream it or was I told, lad, that at two of these annual competitions, the first prize was carried off not long since by a young fellow named—Abel Boden?"

At this Abel flushed quickly, and kicking his heels against the anvil, answered laughingly, "Happen it is, sir."

"Well, my lad, let me tell you I was greatly pleased to hear of it. I kind o' like the best of the kind, always."

"It's but a poor kind, though, at its best."

"Maybe you would rather take a prize for beetles or moths or other kinds of vermin, than for horse-shoeing. Well, it's a matter of taste, lad. And I'm free to say so much to your face as this: If you went in for natural history as a vocation, I'd back you to win. And why? Because you have done your duty by a trade which, I gather, you follow more for daily bread than for hourly love. Keep a stout heart, and happen the day will come when you will beat your last tattoo on the anvil, and after that you'll be able to cultivate your precious vermin. By the by, Abel, I've got most of my books into their places now. You must come up and look at them some evening. Happen you'll find a volume or two that will interest you."

Abel was not backward with his thanks: he had been looking forward with eagerness to seeing Kneebone's books; but chiefly was he grateful just now for that kindly prophecy of Kneebone's anent the last tattoo on the anvil. What connection there was between the coming of that glad day and the keeping of a stout heart; or why that day should not come on the morrow as well as in five years' time; or why that day should ever come, seeing there was nothing in existence to foreshadow it,—these all were dark points to Abel. Still, he was grateful to Kneebone for his hopeful words. There is magic, strange and blessed magic, in mere words of sympathy and cheer and hope: known is this fact of all such as are despondent, as are baffled, as are fighting a good but as yet doubtful fight, as are watching, waiting, listening like Sisera's mother at her lattice-window, peradventure for chariots of victory that will never arrive.

When the struggle is over and the man emerges victorious, he is borne along in a whirlwind of applause that only gives him a wretched headache; while but yesterday and the strife was on, not tears of blood could win for him the mildest zephyr of a hurrah, or a passing whiff of a cheer.

This is odd unless we bear in mind that while it is always safe—and perhaps prudent—to cheer a conqueror, it is risking our reputation for sagacity to put our hands together in a clap for a man who, though fighting bravely, may have the misfortune to be worsted in the event, and whom, of course, we should have to kick when down. Looked at in this way—that is to say, fairly and reasonably—we can recognize the wise and kindly forethought that makes rare as snow in harvest the delusive and uncertain words of sympathy and cheer and hope. It is only superficial and imperfectly informed persons that doubt the deep morality underlying the system of rewards and punishments, as administered by every civilized community.

Kneebone was—well, not a savage exactly, but imperfectly civilized; and by the same token, he cheered a fellow like mad when his adversary had him on one knee; and when a poor devil limped away sore and beaten, he would not even kick him. Kneebone had never heard of him in his life, but that bluff and doughty knight at Worms, who laid his iron-gloved hand on Luther as he passed, and said: “Cheer up, and keep a stout heart, little monk”—was an ancestor of the Blacksmith of Voe; like Kneebone, he was of the clan of the Imperfectly Civilized.

The ruddy glow of the fire was dying out again, so Kneebone went to work with the bellows once more. Presently he turned to Abel and said: “I think one of us ought to go in and try for another prize this year. What sort of innings do you think I should make?”

Abel looked at him with open eyes, and then laughed heartily.

Kneebone looked preternaturally grave at this, and said: “Of course I don’t pretend to be a Jack Wragg; and he’s dead, you see, so I shouldn’t have to face him.”

“No, sir, but there are some handy fellows left,” replied Abel. He tried his best not to laugh, and only succeeded in horribly distorting his beautiful face.

“Why, hang it, man, that’s frank and no mistake! Ain’t I handy? Haven’t you seen me work the bellows?”

“Yes, sir; and you do it very well, too.”

“Haven’t you seen me use the monkey-wrench?”

“Yes; to put on a couple of nuts on a plough. You screwed them on nicely, sir.”

"I've struck for you, haven't I?"

"Once; but you didn't hit the metal in the same spot twice together. Once you struck the anvil, which jarred your hand nearly off, and once you fell foul o' the tongs, which nearly broke my wrist."

"Pshaw! what has that to do with it? I struck twenty-nine times—I counted them—and I might have struck the tongs twenty-nine times, but I didn't. I only struck them once. Well, what else have I done? Oh, I know. Haven't you seen me pull an old shoe off?"

"If I recollect right, sir, it was Farmer Yeo's gray mare, and——" Here Abel stopped, choked with laughter.

Kneebone waited with a grave countenance, until he had recovered himself, and then he said, with a flash that may have been humor in his eyes: "I know what you would say: the carnivorous brute suddenly bit me—never mind where—and I fled, leaving the shoe dangling by three nails. I'll admit that I didn't venture again within range of that man-eating quadruped's jaws. What then? The job would have been finished if I hadn't left it undone; and finished neatly, too. As I drew the old nails, I laid them carefully in a row. In truth, I was just counting them with lawful pride and pleasure when the brute assaulted me. There, there, laugh it out, lad; from an outside view it's funny, I know, barring the teeth." And putting his hands on his knees, Kneebone bent himself like Abel nearly double, and the two men roared at each other with laughter.

"Well," said Kneebone, when it was all over, "I feel better for that. It's many a year since I cried with laughing. And now, lad, I'm going to put a precious thing into your keeping."

"And what may that be?" inquired Abel.

"Nothing less than my reputation. Do you think it will be safe in your hands?"

"I don't think it will suffer; though I'd much rather you would keep it in your own hands, sir."

"You are not over eager for the responsibility, eh?"

"I can't say that I am, unless I can do you a service thereby. In that case, I'm at your service now and always."

"Thank you. Spoken like a man. If my reputation took the form of a bag of diamonds, I could trust you, lad, just the same. I've wondered a good many times how I impressed you as a working blacksmith. And to-night I've found out."

"Happen I've been more frank than polite, sir?"

"Nay, you have been polite enough. You saw the thing as something to laugh at, and you laughed at it. I guess I did

the same. Better laugh than cry, any day. The truth is, lad, I'm no blacksmith. All I know about it I've picked up since I came here."

"Why, what on earth do you mean?" exclaimed Abel, in huge astonishment.

"Just what I say. I couldn't make a shoe if you'd give me a hundred pounds to do it; and as for shoeing a horse, well, I guess I could fix a shoe on if the nails would hold, but whether the animal would be able to walk after, this deponent saith not."

"If that doesn't beat anything I ever heard!" What did you buy the smithy for, if you couldn't work it?"

"The smithy be hanged! I didn't want it, the Lord knows. I had a notion of settling in Voe, and the only place in the market happened to carry with it the village smithy and some land by the river-side, neither of which I wanted. However, they took me for a smith, and I thought I'd be one just to oblige them. If you had left me, though, I should have shut up shop."

"Oh, if Jack Wragg only knew!" said Abel, laughing.

"I am not afraid of Jack Wragg; he's dead, you know, but a living dog is worse than a dead lion. Jack's friends and neighbors are yet alive, and I'm thinking if they knew——"

"It would travel up the valley and across the hills in no time, and would get into the weekly papers. We should never hear the last of it. Happen some of them would be after making it warm for you, Mr. Kneebone."

"I'm not afraid of that, lad—I mean, their making it warm for me. As for the talk—well, I'm not afraid of that, either, though I'd much rather it didn't happen. I want to keep quiet. Make it warm for me, indeed! I lived too long in regions where a man has to be his own law-maker, policeman, judge, jury, jailer, and hangman, to fear any fire they can kindle."

"Ay, but you are in Old England now, where you can't take the law into your own hands like that."

"Well, then, lad, I'd fight them with the law."

"That takes money, and plenty of it. Happen the miller, to spite you, would find the funds for your enemies?"

At this suggestion Kneebone tugged at his chestnut beard, and an angry light shone in his kindly gray eyes. "Then it would be a matter of which had the deepest pocket."

"I'm afraid in that case you'd lose."

"Happen not," growled Kneebone.

Never before had Abel seen him so angry.

"We will hope it won't come to the trial, any way. I don't see why outsiders need ever know anything. You've got through the worst of it, and nobody now doubts you are a regular blacksmith."

But Kneebone was on the war-path now, and was not to be turned aside. "I'm not afraid of its coming to the trial to-morrow. He has tried his game once, on the hillside; and happen he thinks he won, because I choose to let the thing lie quiet. But let him try his hand again! Money, indeed! What's he worth? A paltry five thousand pounds, maybe."

"They say he's worth from twelve to fifteen thousand. He got all Miller Duckmanton's pile."

"All right; give him the benefit of the doubt, and call it fifteen. And just to make sure we are not undervaluing him, we'll add another five, and call it twenty. He's worth twenty thousand pounds, is he?"

"I didn't say so," answered Abel, a little injudiciously.

"Damn it, sir, but I say so, and it shall stand. He'd fight me with twenty thousand pounds, would he? Then I'd fight him pound for pound; and when the first twenty thousand has gone, I've got another twenty to fight with, ay—and another twenty to follow that. And by Heaven! if ever we get going, if it's money that's wanted, I'll beat him, if it takes nigher seventy than sixty thousand to do it. Yes, sirree, the Blacksmith of Voe is a better man than the miller any day, though"—(a long pause, and then)—"the BLACKSMITH is an ass, a stupid, braying ass, when his monkey is once up. And Abel, lad, it isn't worth while remembering anything a donkey says."

"Well, I don't know that. When Balaam's donkey fell a-talking, they thought it worth while to report his observations," said Abel, with a laugh.

"He was a Scriptural character, and I'm not, which makes all the difference; to say nothing of the number of legs he carried, which is unusual in a talker. Lad, as you love your life, keep a still tongue in your head. I meant to keep it silent as the grave. You see you've got a couple of items to guard now. You've got my reputation in charge with a vengeance. Luckily, you don't get drunk and blab."

Kneebone began working the bellows again, while Abel said: "I can take in that you're no blacksmith fairly easy, now you've told me so. You left me to do all the real work; but you paid me well, and I concluded you had had about enough of work in your time, and meant to take it easy in future. The odd jobs you did showed you were not in practice, at any rate;

and to tell you the truth, I didn't think you'd ever been much of a workman. All that I can take in, I say, but——"

He paused, and Kneebone said: "Go on, lad, and but away."

"What am I to think about this sixty thousand pound talk?"

"Think what you like."

"By the same token, it was only tall talk, then. You'll excuse me, sir, I know, but I hope to goodness you will never get wroth with the miller—in public company."

"What's your meaning, lad? Out with it!"

"They might misunderstand you. They haven't travelled like you, sir, and they are not used to that kind of tall talk. In their own way, their talk will top the hills, but yours——"

"Knocks its nose against the moon in mid-heaven, eh? Didn't I tell you I kind o' liked the best of every kind going? But—I'm going to do a bit of butting on my own account now, lad—but there are two kinds of tall talk, I'm thinking: One is founded on fancy pure and simple. The ornamental liar runs that kind of store. The other sort of tall talk is founded on the bed-rock of solid fact; but it is built always by silly vanity or by sillier anger, and its proprietor and tenant is assuredly a bottomless ass. Do you catch on?" inquired Kneebone. It was not often that his Americanism cropped out, but just now it was very strong.

"Yes, I think so. You mean there is a vein of truth in what you said?"

"That and something more. It's more than a vein, lad. If the truth must out, the whole stratum is genuine truth."

"You are worth sixty thousand pounds?" cried Abel in undisguised amazement.

"Yes, I am, and more, too; but not a word, lad, mind you! Keep it like the grave. Some day I'll tell you all about it. Now, lad, it's getting late, and we can't be here all night. I got the squire to lend me that horse there, and what I want you to do is to teach me to-night how to make a shoe, and how to put it on when it's made. If I'm to play smith, I must know something of the game. Happen I'll be an apt scholar, lad."

CHAPTER XX

A WITNESS TELLS HIS TALE

THERE had been no rain to speak of since Christmas, and the merry month of May was at the threshold. Snow there had been and plenty of it, and sleet, and hail; but of genuine rain there had been none. The Voese made no count, in this reckoning, of a few passing showers that were licked up by the thirsty earth ere the clouds that had dropped them had crossed the hills; nor did they condescend to remember the week of days during which time the tops of the hills and the bottoms of the valleys were hidden from sight in a gray, fog-like mist, that surreptitiously wet one to the skin in no time. No need of rain, forsooth, when the kindly clouds lower themselves bodily to the earth, and tarry for the space of forty-eight hours at a stretch, turning the world into a vapor-bath, and transforming men and women into ridiculous aquatic animals with umbrellas and overcoats. But all this was not rain—any Voe man knew that. Says Mamma Frog, popping up her head out of the pond, to her children playing on the banks in the rain, My dears, my dears, come in out of the rain. You will get wet! So would a mother at Voe call to her offspring to come in, should a passing cloud drop water, though she herself were half drowned in the belly of a rain-blown cloud that was masquerading below in the disguise of an innocent mist.

But now at last the rain had come; it was the genuine article, and there was any quantity of it. It was beginning to spit when Abel left the smithery, and by the time he reached home he was drenched through and through. It rained all night, and all the next day. This would not have mattered much, but that Nathan had a plan in his head which the rain prevented him from carrying out. His back was still straight, his vision keen, his teeth sound, and his step firm; but he was eighty-one next birthday, had joints and muscles, and had to be ever on the alert, especially in damp weather, to circumvent that diabolical body-twister yclept rheumatism. Nathan had been pretty successful so far in eluding his great enemy; but old age was creeping upon him, and the foe, *audacius subsistere*, be-

gan to engage him more frequently in battle. To save himself from warping, he had to keep himself dry on wet days; so Nathan sat working in his warm and snug little shop at the back of the cottage, and growled at the weather.

Toward night the clouds lightened, and the pelting rain gave place to drizzling mist. This was the state of affairs when Nathan looked out just before going to bed. In the morning he opened his eyes and expected to see the sun; but no sun was visible, and he heard the rain coming down as in the days of Noah. So it went on all that day and the next, and on the morning of the fourth day, lo! it rained as vigorously and joyously as when it first began. Then was Nathan exceeding wroth, and with his glance fixed on the opened windows of heaven, wanted to know "what th' dooce was the use of a rainbow if it was only to deceive plain, honest country folk, and get 'em to forego the craft o' ship-building?" He struck work, as a kind of protest, and went about the house and did nothing but growl and growl and growl; and being a righteous man according to his lights, his prayers were heard, and the open windows of heaven were three parts shut. After his mid-day dinner, Nathan looked out, and though it was still raining lightly, through a rift in the clouds he caught a glimpse of the sun, which seemed, he thought, to turn sick and pale with very shame at sight of an honest man's eye, and to plunge headlong behind the clouds.

"It's now or never. If I don't go now, happen I'll be found like a drowned rat dead in me hole, when the waters abate," murmured Nathan, as he came out and locked the door after him.

In dry weather Voe can boast some of the finest roads in the kingdom, and in wet some of the vilest. They were wet now, and Nathan found them vile beds of sticky mud. But, luckily, round about Voe there are always two or more ways of getting anywhere—a sign this of a region long inhabited. In the colonies and other newly settled countries, nothing strikes an old-world man with a stranger sense of practical inconvenience than the total absence of footpaths, by-ways, and short cuts in general; there humanity has not yet had time to show forth its instinctive love of deviating from the straight and broad highway by innumerable little trails that run their zigzag course in all directions. A symbolist would say: These colonists are a straightforward folk, and move contentedly along the broad and open road of righteousness. But the realist would say: This is a people that valueth a whole skin, and forgetteth not that the landowners are rough on trespassers.

Nathan, living in a district that was the ancient home of path-treaders so far back as the time when Julius Cæsar came to Britain, was under no necessity of keeping to the public river of mud, and accordingly he took to the woods and the fields. But here, again, difficulties confronted him: he had escaped being bogged only to risk being drowned. Twice his path ran through "gentle dimplements," which looked—in fine weather

"As if God's finger touched, but did not press,
In making England."

Just now, however, each dimple held—shall we say, a tear? Each tear like unto those that Neptune shed when he made the inland seas—a hundred hogsheads to the tear. Once the old man came to a spot that looked as if somebody's finger, not to say fist, had pressed upon it pretty hard—this also was full of tears; and as the dell was walled with splintered crags, Nathan had to do a bit of nimble climbing.

But worse than all were the streams, of which there were three or four to be crossed; they were small in body and loud in tongue as a general thing, and their tiny beds were between banks from two to three feet in height, covered with mosses, mother of thousands, liverwort, and other wild growths. To-day every rill was swollen to an able-bodied stream, and every stream had grown into a self-important river. The banks were flooded, the stepping-stones were swamped, and the one solitary foot-bridge showed to the eye nothing but a miraculous hand-rail socketed in running water. But Nathan was a son of the hills and the streams, and had seen the floods out more than once in the course of his long life. He had on long fishermen's boots that reached up to his thighs; he knew every ford, stepping-stone, and shallow of the Scarthin and all its tributaries within a dozen miles. So now, when there was nothing else for it, he went ploughing through the rushing waters as coolly as if he had been going through a field of standing corn. At length he entered a small park, and his pace slackened: in front of him was Carbel Chase, its gray stone face three parts covered with ivy, closely cut and of vivid green.

"Happen it's a foo's errand I'm on. It's a bold 'un, there's no denying that. I mun save th' lad if I can, for poor owd Abel's sake. Drat it! thee art afraid o' mortal man, Nathan Wass. Thee art a coward if thee dunna straighten thee back, strengthen thee joints, and mend thee pace a bit," soliloquized Nathan.

Apparently the self-imputation of cowardice stung him. He threw off in a dozen paces the weight of as many years, and

marched forward like a veteran. He was making his way round to the back of the house, when Balthasar Phythian stepped to the door of a long conservatory that ran the whole length of one side of the house, and accosted him.

"Do you wish to see me, Nathan?" inquired Balthasar.

"Yes, sir," answered Nathan, a little flurried at the unexpected meeting, and touching his cap.

"Then come in here. I can swim, but I am liable to have cramp, and I have no desire to be drowned; so here I take my daily constitutional, and keep a lookout for the deluge. Yewdle Brig is getting on swimmingly, I hear. They talk of getting up boat-races in the streets. How is it down at Voe?"

"Pretty well so far, sir, an' thank you. The Scarthin's riz pretty high, I see as I come along. Happen it'll rise higher afore it goes down again."

"I hardly think so. The glass is going up."

At this Nathan cast a reproachful look at the sky, as though it had been deceiving him with false signs. His confidence in his own natural barometer seemed, however, to be fully restored by this quick survey.

"I'm mighty sorry for the glass, then, for the rain's a-coming, certain sure, sir. Happen it's a Lunnon glass, sir?"

"Yes, I believe it is. What then?"

"Them foreign instruments are no good in Peakshire. Their insides binna right. What's a Lunnoner to know o' the weather-tokens o' Voe?"

"Not much, Nathan, you may be sure," laughed Balthasar. He added: "There will be a flood, I fear, as it is. There has been a heavy downfall higher up the river, I'm told."

"Happen it'll carry off a few lambs, or I dunna know it 'ud do much damage. If it's got to come, better to get it o'er and done with afore harvest-time. I've seen hundreds o' tons o' new hay go swishing down the Scarthin like so much weed afore now."

"You mean the great flood fifty years ago?"

"Ay; but that was a sight to see! The meadows was washed bare of every living thing. Dozens of cattle and sheep went under Voe bridge that day. Talking about bridges, the river was full of 'em. It carried down nigh a score, as I recollect. We've had some stiff floods more than once sen then, but naught like unto that un, sir."

"And it is to be hoped we never shall have again."

"So say I. Not but what there be worse things in the world nor floods. By the same token be feuds, to my thinking."

"Feuds? I expected fires and famines. Feuds are very

small things nowadays, Nathan. We civilized men have had our claws pared so closely, and for so long a time, that we have none of the old-world passion left in us. Our hates are like our loves, our virtues like our vices—once strong now feeble, once colossal now pigmy, once sublime and now ridiculous. The best Christian in the Parish of Yewdle Brig or of Voe to-day does not, and for the life of him could not, hate anything or anybody in the fine, sweeping, untamed Satanic manner of—say the Scarthin when its back is up. No, sir. Give the devil his due—the flood before the feud.”

“Happen, Mr. Phythian, you like the wickedest of the two? No offence, sir. It’s on’y a matter o’ taste,” said Nathan, with something of the sensation of a sudden gust of sleet, that well-nigh robbed him at a blast of both breath and eyesight.

Balthasar’s dark eyes twinkled with humor. “Right you are, Nathan. Of two wicked things, the wickeder is nine times out of ten the less stupid and the more interesting. I like things that are interesting. Therefore, for sheer interest, I would rather have a flood than a feud. Wouldn’t you?”

“Why, yes, sir; that’s what I said at the start.”

“Ah, but for a different reason, Nathan. But one would think, to hear us talk, that Voe was a very undesirable place to dwell in. Whereas I imagine we both think alike, that it is full of delectable bowers, and sweet temples of faith and hope and charity. I venture to say, Nathan, that no man in Voe calls himself your enemy.”

“As to that, I dunna know. I know there’s one man that Nathan Wass dunna call his friend. I never mak’ no mystery of his name, sir, and he knows it. It’s Luke Boden, miller an’—farmer I’m thinking it is he likes to be called. Happen I could tack on summat after miller that ’ud roll smoother and soun’ wuss than that, if I tried,” said Nathan, in a tone that left nothing to be desired in the direction of dark significance. No babbler, boaster, or back-biting accuser was the tall, white-haired old broom-maker, whose eyes held an angry light just now. Balthasar knew this.

“Why, man alive!” he cried, in astonishment, “what do you mean? He might have committed murder, to hear you talk.”

“Happen, if he had, you wouldna feel like——”

“Like what?”

“Nothing—naught, naught, sir. On’y me tongue is fleeter nor me wit. The one’s a full-grown loon, an’ t’other’s but a half-weaned baby, and it isna quite fair to run ’em side by side. Talking o’ th’ miller, minds me, sir, there’s a little matter I’d like to utter a few words on to you.”

"I am at your service, Nathan."

"It's on'y for your ear, sir," said Nathan, looking about to see if any one was likely to be within earshot.

"It's all right. We are quite by ourselves," answered Balthasar, beginning to feel curious.

"It's anent the common fame, sir, of yourself and the miller's daughter," said Nathan, speaking slowly and gravely, and with a noticeable freedom from dialectical idiom, of which he could purge his speech when he cared to try.

A look of surprise shot into the countenance of Balthasar, and at first he met Nathan's glance with something that looked very much like angry pride. But it vanished in a few moments, and his habitual expression of lurking humor came back as he said:

"It is said, Nathan, that fame always among the gods tells truth. But she takes her revenge when she comes back among men. Do gods or men live at Voe? Men. She has been taking her revenge among them, I fear."

"What the crowd says doesna mean (matter). I hanna come here, sir, on the strength o' that. I go on what young Abel Boden has tow'd me."

"Ah, yes; you are friends. He lives with you, I believe?"

"He does that, sir. An' I knowed his father afore him. We were like a couple o' brothers, though I was welly owd enough to be his father."

"I remember him too, very well. I always thought his going was a great mistake. As it is, we know only one side of the story."

"And a cluntering tale it be, sir."

"You think it goes awkwardly, do you?"

"It's clomb all-fours on to th' chair o' truth, an' there it sits to this hour. But I'm a-thinking it's naught but a westy (dizzy) yeaded lie, as'll come down wi' a clatter some o' these days. Happen you think, sir, this is wide of our present business. But it isna. If that day's work hadna been done twenty years ago, I shouldna ha' been here on this errand now. Somehow, Mr. Phythian, I feel I'm doing a very bold thing to meddle with aught that concerns yourself, and I'll be sampous (lucky) to escape your displeasure. But it's on me conscience that I mun save th' lad if I can."

This was Nathan's apology, and Balthasar accepted it, much wondering what was to follow. Nathan's reputation for minding his own business, his sturdy independence of character, his almost austere self-respect, which was the fit and proper basis of his well-known respect for his social betters—this, coupled

with his present evident embarrassment, tickled Balthasar's curiosity. Said he:

"Let me hear what you have to say. I will serve you gladly, if I can."

At this Nathan drew a long breath, and answered:

"Thank you, sir. To drive a straight furrow, then, I dunna want Mr. Phythian to step aside for young Abel Boden, as regards the miller's daughter. I'm thinking you've on'y naished it on his account. But he's no right to her, and he munna have her. That's th' kernel o' th' thing; and if I've offended you, I can only say, sir, I didna osse (intend) to."

This was slightly dialectical, but Nathan's sense of insufficiency, verging upon desperation, naturally led him to choose the line of least resistance in language; moreover, Balthasar was a native, and was not to be bogged by dialect.

"You have not offended me in the least, Nathan, but you have very much surprised me. I thought Miss Boden's relations with our picturesque young blacksmith were something of a secret. Mr. Kneebone and Violet Chalk excepted, I thought I was the only person who knew of them. Has young Boden told you exactly how the matter stands in regard to myself?"

"I believe he has."

"Indeed! My position has been a peculiar one from the first, and it seems to be growing more peculiar as time goes on. There is Jano, for instance—Jano, you know, is my sister, Miss Phythian—she thinks the affair is running beautifully, and is very proud of her handiwork. I believe she has already begun to overhaul the household linen, against the day when she will surrender all the keys of her kingdom, power, and glory to Mrs. Balthasar Phythian, *née* Boden. Of my many friends, the fools write to her inquiring as to the state of my health, and hint at a temporary derangement of my mental faculties, at which I am amused, and she, being angry, answers a fool according to his folly. On the other hand, the knaves write me congratulatory letters chock-full of false sentiment and democratic jargon. As though a lover—be he Tory or Whig, loon or lord, gentle or simple, rich or poor—were not always and everywhere the one pure typical aristocrat the world over!—as though the cant about equality were not of necessity mere vulgar brainless insult, to the man who has discovered in the object of his love the QUEEN of women! The remnant of my friends, being neither fools nor knaves, mostly stand off and are silent; a few have spoken to me personally, and their words were wise as proverbs, and sweet as old songs. These are only lookers-on at the play; but here are you fresh from behind the scenes,

with the very smell of the green-room upon you. Nathan Wass, it is to be hoped that report lies not when it trumpets you as a discreet man."

"I reckon th' lad knowed th' kind o' man I be, afore he ventured his word wi' me," said Nathan, straightening his back as he spoke.

"Does he know you have come to see me?" inquired Balthasar, with a touch of malice.

Nathan's wrinkled and weather-beaten face grew suddenly red.

"No, he doesna; but I sh'll tell him 'at after. An I'd tow'd him afore, there'd ha' been a bit of a row, happen."

"I'm not sure but what it would be better to say nothing about it to him. I do not see that it would do any good, and it might do harm; however, that is your own affair—only, think it over first. I should like to know why you do not wish those two to come together? You have a reason, of course?"

Nathan had foreseen this very question, and the foresight had occasioned him no little disquietude. The true answer would, of course, have been the easiest and the best; it was fit and proper, covered the whole ground so neatly, and occupied his mind so completely, as to leave no standing-room for any of the various answers, more or less ingenious and more or less fictitious, which he had mentally framed on his way to the Chase. But Nathan's real reason for wishing to keep Abel and Ruth apart happened to be one that did not lend itself easily to the occasion; it involved certain facts of a nature somewhat startling and dangerous. Marbles are one thing, and explosive bullets are another. Here he was, however, at last face to face with the great question, and his mind was still not made up. He looked at Balthasar for some moments in silence. He was not framing his answer. He was thinking of nothing but—sheep-washing! He saw the washers up to their waists in the waters of the Scarthin; the sheep floating on their backs, held up by the head; on the high bank, a sheep held by a man stood with its fore-feet stiffly planted out, waiting its turn to be thrown neck and crop into the dark water below. Those stiffly planted feet say plainly: "Jump in? No, sir—not quite. If I go, you throw me." Yet at the signal, see! the sheep at a touch takes a leap, and bounds into the water like a stag! At the same moment, Nathan took the hint, made up his mind, and—jumped.

"Yes, sir," he said, speaking with deliberation; "I have a fairly good rayson, but it isna one to be bruited idly about. If, when you hear it, you count it a thing for the birds to

whistle about, let 'em have it to whistle. For mesen, I've kept it close for twenty year, thinking it too shamefu' for th' birds o' th' air to twitter it. Happen th' time's come when that which is hid should be brought to light." He drew close to Balthasar, and said almost in a whisper: "My name for Miller Boden is—'Murderer'!"

Balthasar gave a start and drew back, exclaiming: "Good heavens, man! what do you mean?"

"He tried his hand at murdering his brother, Abel; that's what——"

But Balthasar put up his hands, palms outward, and averted his head. "Nay, nay," he cried in horror; "stop, man, stop! I won't hear it. If it is true, you should tell it to a magistrate. If it is false, good heavens! you deserve, old as you are, to be whipped at the cart-tail, from end to end of the parish."

For some moments the old man made no reply, only he drew himself up to his full height, and looked at Balthasar with a calm, proud look on his wrinkled face. Presently he sighed deeply, and then, while a contemptuous smile showed itself about his mouth, he said:

"An Nathan Wass speaks fawse (false), a whippin' at th' cart-tail is naught. I'd say, put irons on his shackles (wrists), a omber (horse-collar) o' hemp around his neck, sit him on a dung-cart, and drive him aneath th' tawest whoke-tree (oak-tree) in the parish, throw th' t'other end of th' hemp o'er a good stout limb, and let every honest man in Voe lend a hand to heft th' rogue into th' air."

"You mean to say solemnly the man's a murderer?"

"I do. In thought and belief he's a murderer."

"But not in deed, do you mean?"

"I grant he didna finish his deed—so far he is no murderer. But he began it, and he meant to finish it, and what's more, he believes to this hour that he did finish it. And I say the difference atwixt him and a real murderer is thin as air."

"Will you tell me how you happen to know all this?"

"I saw it all wi' me own eyes. I was agate o' goin' to Yewdle Brig, on'y I bethought me of some broom o'er at Potter's Carr, and started to go there. As you know, it isna more na five minutes' walk from the cottage to the foot o' th' quarry, an' when I got there I made for the moor above, by going through the plantation this side th' quarry. Th' day was very hot, and the side o' th' hill pretty steep, and when I was about half-way up I sat down agen a stone, just inside the plantation and o'erlooking the quarry. In a little or no time I heard voices, and looking up to the quarry-brow, I saw the

two Boden lads; they seemed to be having some hot words or other. Soon Luke made a spring at his brother, and there they was clutchin' an' fightin' like mad dogs, not a dozen feet from th' edge o' th' quarry. Lord! I felt sure they'd both be o'er, and sure enough one of 'em went over like a ball. You see, I gather it grew into a fight for life, and Abel won: he threw Luke, who rolled right over; but he wasna hurt, not to speak on. I saw him wi' me own eyes. In five feet he touched the loose shingle, rolled over, and dropped into a young ash-tree; he went clean through it, and went down a dozen feet right on to the owd yew-tree; then he struck some bushes, rolled a bit at after, and drew up agen a green stone."

"Why, I wonder he wasn't killed twice over!" exclaimed Balthasar.

"What was there to kill him? He fell from tree to tree, an' was let down at last gently as a new-born babe. An' he had travelled any other road, there wouldna ha' been much life left in him at th' end, happen. By-and-by comes Abel like a wild man to the edge, and cries: 'Luke, Luke, where art th'?' Luke, sitting on his haunches by th' green stone, looks up, and crouches down, and harkens out, but mak's no word of answer. He was on th' narrow shelf o' rock that crosses the face o' th' quarry; up above it, there's a big table o' rock jutting out, on to which I saw him crawl and lie down under some bushes: we was on a line wi' one another then. I wondered what his game was, when all of a sudden like there was Abel coming along the shelf o' rock in search of his brother. For a while I forgot to look at Luke, until Abel was right under him, then—ah, God! I couldna move nor cry; I was dumb and helpless with sheer horror. There on that table rock was that devil of a miller ho'ding a stone that looked as big as a grindstone, in both hands, right o'er Abel's head. One—two—three—down it went with a thud. I heard th' poor lad groan; I saw him go down. Not a damned tree or bush or shrub was there to break *his* fa'!"

And the old man paused, and took out his handkerchief, and used it vigorously. Balthasar waited until Nathan had overcome his emotion, then he inquired:

"Did the miller leave him there?"

"Oh, no, sir; he had to cover up his work. He went down to the bottom of the quarry, and picking up the body of his brother, carried it to an owd lead-mine, and pitched it down the shaft. Then he covered up the shaft agen, wi' boards and stones, and limped back wum, an' tow'd his lying tale, which holds its ground to this hour."

"Oh, it's horrible, horrible!" exclaimed Balthasar, beginning to promenade the conservatory in an excited manner. Presently he halted in front of Nathan, and said:

"I cannot let this thing rest here. The man's a murderer, and should be brought to justice. Are you prepared to tell on oath to judge and jury what you have told me?"

"I be that, sir."

"You know where he hid the body?"

"It isna quarter of a mile from the cottage."

"You think we can find the body, then?" Nathan shook his head.

"Why not? Surely he has not taken it away?"

"Not he, sir. I'd wager aw I'm worth, you couldna bribe him for love or money to go nigh th' spot. It's like this, sir—I hanna tow'd you the end o' th' story yet. Happen you remember of me saying he began his work and thought he'd finished it, but he hadna?"

"For goodness' sake, Nathan, out with it, and have done! I never saw such a slow fellow in my life," said Balthasar impatiently.

"Happen I'm slow acos it's an owd, owd tale wi' me, and you're o'er quick acos it's a new story to you. The body isna there—acos I took it away. It was like this: I followed Luke, keeping in the background. And when he'd gone, I fell to work and opened up the shaft. It was a deep un, I well knowed, an' full o' water wi'in three foot o' th' top. The miller didna know, but I knowed, that when they covered o'er th' shaft thirty year afore that time, they laid some boards across it, eight or ten foot from th' top. An they were still there and strong enow, there was a chance o' my getting him up. Well, I lay down and looked o'er, and there doubled up in a heap was poor Abel. His head lay on one side, resting agen th' slimy side o' th' shaft; but, thank God, it war out o' th' water! The Lord knows how I did it, I dunna. But I got him out, and carried him to the cottage, and—and, *he wasna dead, sir*. Lord! I alleys cry when I think o' it, and I cried then for joy. Well, sir, I brought him to; and when they was out after him wi' a warrant, I hid him close, and nursed him many a week, and set him up a well man agen; on'y battered, sir, battered and marred, and sorely shaken, poor lad."

"And what became of him?"

Here Nathan growled and shook his head, and showed unmistakable signs of disgust.

"Don't you know?" persisted Balthasar.

"No, no. He disappointed me sorely. I dunna know an

you recollect, sir, that I came forrard at the time and kind of supported the miller's tale?"

"Yes, I remember it perfectly. You said you had seen Luke thrown over the cliff by Abel. People said hard things about you at the time, I remember. They thought, as you were Abel's friend, you might have kept a still tongue," answered Balthasar.

"I was a foo', a soft-headed foo', and so I've tow'd mesen times and times agen. It was aw his doings, you may be sure. When he come to, I wanted to send for a justice o' th' peace to tak' down his words, for I didna think he would live. Said he, 'Wass, an you do, I'll curse you wi' me dying breath. He's my brother, man.' I tow'd him at after o' th' tale Luke had set agoin'. He wanted to know whether the folk believed it or not. I said, No, they wanna such dolts. He said no word for a time, then he whispered—he couldna talk above a whisper—'Wass, thou art known as a man who speaks little, and that little true. You saw me pitch Luke o'er. Say as much, and folk will believe Luke's story. If they don't believe him, it will go hard with him. You've saved my life. Won't you save his name—for my sake?' I stood out, but the poor lad seemed sore distressed at the thought that his brother might get into trouble an we didna back him up. The upshot was, I went out an' backed up Luke's lie. I tow'd naught but the truth; but being a fragment on'y o' th' truth, it was as good as a thundering lie, and aw to save th' credit o' that villain."

"And what became of him at last?"

"He went to New Zealand. On and off I heard from him for four or five years. He seemed to be troubling about his lad; so I sent him word I would keep an eye on the lad, and see he was looked after. Two years later he sent me three hundred pounds to take care on for the lad, and pay his board and schooling wi'. I wrote and tow'd him I was no pauper, and the lad lacked naught; but I would guard the money till the lad was setting up housekeeping. And it's in the bank to this day. As for owd Abel, I've heard no more of him sen. But I dunna think he's dead. He'll turn up one o' these days, and please God I'd like to live to look once agen into his kind owd eyes."

"Perhaps you will, Nathan. There's no knowing. I am profoundly glad we haven't got to denounce the miller. What a sensation it would have made! I really thought I was in for it at last. It is a strange tale you have told me, Nathan—a strange, sad tale. I shouldn't have thought the miller would have done a thing like that. And he actually thinks he is a

murderer! I shall take more interest in him than ever. As for the two young ones, I suppose your feeling is that Abel would object if he knew?"

"I'm o' that opinion strong. You see, sir, it isna as though the miller was sorry for what he thinks he did that day."

"That is saying a great deal, is it not? For all you know, he is more sorry than we could very well imagine."

"Nay, he's none sorry. And the proof o' it is the way he's alleys treated young Abel. He'd ruin the lad an he could. Nay, nay; had he stood by owd Abel's child, instead o' doin' aw he could agen him, I should ha' judged he was sorry. And happen I should ha' eased his mind afore to-day, by letting him know his brother wasna dead. He's none sorry, and by the same token, I say there's blood atwixt th' young uns, and they munna wed. I'm thinking, Abel, the father, would say the same."

"Perhaps you are right, but I must think it over. My future relations with Miss Boden will necessarily depend on what conclusion I arrive at. My opinion of her remains unaltered: I think the man who marries her, be he Abel Boden or Balthasar Phythian, will get a prize in the line of womanhood."

"I'm willing to believe, sir, she's a good girl enow. All I have agen her is she's Luke Boden's girl, and by the same token not the lass for young Abel. There, sir, didna I tell you there was more rain to come?" said Nathan, as the rain began to drive heavily against the glass.

Balthasar thought it would soon be over, and urged the old man to wait until it cleared a bit; but Nathan prophesied what he styled "a mighty lomb," and presently set out on his homeward journey. Soon Janoca came into the conservatory and spent some time chatting with her brother and encouraging her much loved plants to do their best, by gentle touches, and sweet looks, and soft words of admiration and affection. Meanwhile Balthasar looked on, with a wild and awful desire "to own up," and take his sister into his confidence, and gain the priceless boon of her advice and counsel. By-and-by she left him and went into the house; then he gave a great sigh of relief, like one delivered from danger, and said half audibly, "Thank Jupiter, I didn't take the plunge!" Yet the more he thought about his situation in regard of Ruth, the less he liked it, and the more he wondered that he had ever brought it about. The idea struck him that he would like to have a talk with Kneebone, of whom he had heard much from Ruth. So toward evening, although it was still pelting with rain, he started for Voe. From a terrace of the overhanging hill above the vil-

lage, he could see the Scarthin below. "Ha! the flood is out, then, and—yes, by Jove, there's something up!" he cried, as his glance rested on the bridge, where in the gloom of the valley he saw a small crowd of dark figures moving about in an excited manner.

CHAPTER XXI

A GUST OF THE SOUL AND——

ON the morning of the same day that Nathan Wass paid his visit to Gentleman Phythian, Miller Boden, encased in a great thick waterproof coat, left home very early in his hooded Tim-whisky, of respectable if old-fashioned appearance. He had a long, dreary drive before him of over twenty miles, mostly across wild moorland, with only here and there a stray roadside inn where he could find accommodation, good or otherwise, for himself and his beast. It was a sad day for a jaunt over the black and desolate moors, whose aspect is never of the kindest, and is apt to show grim under cloud and storm. It was certain to be bad under foot, but the miller had good horse-flesh, and his business was urgent, and, as he justly observed, he was a lump neither of sugar nor salt that he should fear a sprinkling or a spate of water. He shouted to Ruth, who stood at the door, as he drove out of the courtyard into the lane: "Have a good fire and a dish o' tea for me, Ruthie. I shall be back ere nightfall."

It was a limp, dripping, colorless day for Ruth; she was tired of being in the house day after day, and of listening to the ceaseless patter of the rain. Then it was enough to try the sweetest temper in the world, to think what a grand opportunity was being lost to the two lovers. If only Abel had known—but there, he did not know, and the dull, leaden hours were slipping away, and soon there would be nothing left but the bitter memory of a golden opportunity utterly wasted. In the afternoon, as we know, there was a spell of two or three hours when, in answer to Nathan's righteous growl, the windows of heaven were three parts shut. Ruth went out into the back-garden, and stood in the entrance to the ivy-covered bower, and found a great joy in breathing God's glorious oxygen, in listening to the humming of the bees, and in smelling the wet buds. But it was over all too soon. The clouds closed up, doubled themselves together, rolled on the top of each other, grew black in the face with fierce determination, and recommenced their kindly little game of washing the valley folk of

Peakshire into the sea. Ruth sat upstairs in her chamber sewing, and dreaming young love's dream, ever sweet and musical and of immortal hopefulness, albeit there was a dark-colored strain of sadness in the dream; as in the mellow murmur of the Scarthin, which was distinctly audible through her partly opened casement, there seemed to intrude at intervals a deep roar that was tuned only to the tragic music of sorrow and anguish.

“I never heard
Of any true affection, but 'twas nipt
With care, that, like the caterpillar, eats
The leaves of the spring's sweetest book, the rose.”

After some time the changed voice of the river caught her attention, and she put down her work and stood at the window listening. It was not at all like the familiar and greatly loved voice of the Scarthin, strong yet soft and rich and joyous, she thought. It sounded more like the angry growl of a savage beast, sullen and fierce. The sound haunted her. I suppose there is a chord of superstition in every one of us. It may be more or less difficult to strike it, but once struck, we revert in an instant to the attitude of primitive mankind, and shiver and burn with fearful and uncontrollable awe.

Nothing she knew of in Nature awoke in Ruth such a terrible sense of personal impotence, face to face with supernatural malignity, as the sight of the Scarthin in a flood. Twice only, when she was a child, she had seen it filled to the top of its deep and beautiful banks, and she had cowered back and hidden her face in her hands, trembling in speechless and incomprehensible terror. And now, as its sullen roar came up from the valley, something of her childish terror stole over her. She withdrew from the window, and went into another part of the house, the farthest removed from the sound; but the dull roar followed her. It was not so much in her ears as in her soul. After tea, she put on a mackintosh with a hood, which she pulled over her head, and ran down the courtway into the lane. Here she mounted the bank, and went to the edge of a belt of larches, where she stood and surveyed the scene below her. “Ah, the flood!” she gasped, her hands to her breast, while her eyes opened wide with the nameless terror. Yes, the flood was out, and no wonder. Draining the hills and the high uplands of Peakshire, whence it issued at race-horse speed, tumbling over rocks big and little in a perpetual white foam, the Scarthin had brought a flood on its back more than once into the valley, without any warning and without a drop of rain having fallen at Voe. But it had been raining now, high and

low, for days together: but for the preceding dry weather, in which the land became exceeding thirsty, the springs feeble, and the subterranean reservoirs pretty empty, the Scarthin would have lifted its back two days ago. Now, however, the soil on the uplands was saturated, the underground cisterns were overflowing, the tributaries had waxed big, and every rill, ditch, and carrier was pouring its own little torrent into the swollen Scarthin.

The dark spirit of the flood seized the river, and it began to rise with great rapidity. At mid-day the water under Voe bridge was thirty-five feet from the top of the middle arch—there were nine arches in all; three spanning the river, with great circular buttresses to break the force of the water, and three on each side spanning the meadow-lands—but at half-past five of the clock, when Ruth first saw the flood, the river was within twenty feet of the keystone of the middle arch, and was still rising at the rate of sixteen inches an hour.

Luckily for Voe, it was perched too high for the water-demon to devour it; but both above and below Voe there were hamlets and villages and even towns that were built on a level with its banks, as sublimely superior to any vulgar regard for safety as any village on the slope of a volcano. In these places people were already receiving, with wry faces, prizes for proficiency in folly; in their upper rooms, whither they had fled for safety, they could hear the splashing of water, and the odd noise of tables and chairs and pianos as they bumped against each other floating about. One man there was lying flat on a large oak table, to escape knocking his head against the open beams of the ceiling—and the water was still rising! Ruth might have been a statue, so motionless was she for a long while. Suddenly, however, she started, and apparently shuddered as she murmured: "I must save her, or she will be drowned." Thereupon she hied back to the house, and said to Jane: "I am going to see after Dame Betty Iperson. I shall try and get back before father gets home. Keep a good fire, and have everything ready for his tea." Then she went forth. Half-way down the lane whom should she meet but Mistress Violet Chalk, who exclaimed:

"Making so bold, and where may you be off to, Miss Ruth? I was just coming up to see how you were all getting on."

"O Violet, I am so glad to see you! I want you to ask Abel to come and meet me coming home. I am going to see how Dame Betty is," said Ruth, in a tone almost of defiance.

"Nay, you're surely not! Do you know the river's flooded?"

"What of that? I am no child, Violet."

"Since when have you lost your fear of the flood?"

"Don't be ridiculous, please. If there's any danger, I can come back and get help. I must see after the old woman. If anything happened to her I should never forgive myself."

"You will come back through the wood?"

"Yes."

"If you've set your mind on going, it isn't Violet Chalk that can stop you, Miss Ruth; that I know very well. However, I'll set somebody after you that can manage you well enough, I've no doubt. And to think you are actually going past the old oak again, all alone!"

Not till this moment had Ruth thought one whit of the tree wherein she had seen the face of the satyr. The spiritual terror of the flooded river razed from her memory all smaller fears. But now as she thought of that horrible vision of the tree she—trembled? No. A quick pain shot through her, cold as a spear of ice, but her head went up proudly, and her foot came down bravely, and into her sweet mouth there came a firmness that betokened a courage true as steel. Nevertheless, as her glance rested on the rushing waters, her eyes were wide open like those of a child affrighted. There was nothing to be seen now of the footpath along the river-side, through the meadows; so Ruth followed the Yewdle Brig road until she came to the wood, which she entered through a narrow opening in the stone wall, and following a little-used trail that ran down the steep hillside, she struck at bottom into the regular track near the boundary-wall. Where the land dipped, she could hear the water lapping the wall; once or twice the path itself had been turned into a standing pool, and the girl had to climb the hill in order to get round it.

On a rising ground Ruth plucked up courage and made her way through the thick bushes to the wall, to see how things looked. Before her lay a vast expanse of water, broken all over with the pouring rain: the toothsome grassland between the wood and the river, wherein she had watched the sober-minded lambs of the nineteenth century, had become the bed of a rushing torrent; whether the sheep had been washed away she knew not. Across the river, on grassy knolls and high patches of meadow-land, were grouped cattle in twos and threes; there were milch-cows among them, and these at short intervals lowed as if in pain with their full udders. As for the Scarthin, its high terraced banks, dotted with low bushes and honeycombed with miniature caves dry and sandy, were entirely submerged, and nothing remained to indicate the ordinary outline and course of the river save a double row of trees, which

looked like large bushes floating on the top of the water. What with the gray, sad clouds in the sky, and the pelting rain, and the cruel waste of water before her eyes, it was little wonder that Ruth turned sick at heart, and her spiritual terror smote her courage that it reeled again. She turned away, with her face set homeward. She went perhaps a dozen yards, and then she suddenly stopped, and stamping her right foot, exclaimed: "O you wretched coward! And perhaps the water is about her this very moment, and she cannot get upstairs for rheumatism, and she will drown, and all because I—I haven't got the heart of a hen, in sight of the flood. O Abel, my love, send me a gust of thy brave soul! So—so—so—it has come! I drink it in! I am Abel's girl now!" She drew in her breath deeply again and again, as if in very truth she felt the fearless spirit of her lover were in the air; then she faced round and went forward toward her duty and—the old oak-tree. The path now ran along pretty high ground and was dry, but the water was within a few feet of it. The boundary-wall had given place to a thick hedge, planted on a bank with a deep slope toward the river.

As she sped along, Ruth was struck with the effect of the flood upon birds and animals. On the top of tall, outstanding trees were gathered rooks with outstretched necks and ruffled plumes, cawing dismally; partridges huddled together in coveys, terror-stricken; the waters plashed them, but they only huddled the closer against the bank-side or the tree-bottom, until they were submerged and drowned. The timid rabbit and fearful hare forgot their instinct for hiding, and leaving their holes and hedge-bottoms, climbed high up into the branches overhead, and would allow themselves to be taken with the hand. They acted most irrationally, reflected the girl; but she understood their terror, and gave them her pitiful sympathy. She felt that she stood very close to them in this hour of Nature's wild mastery. If she had reason to support her, they had cunning instinct and strong wings and swift feet; but the terror of the Spate was supreme. And yet it was not so after all, for had she not within her a gust of Abel's soul? And when knew Abel's soul any fear of Nature? She came within sight of the satyr's tree, and lo! she shivered not, neither did she tingle, nor yet did her heart so much as quicken its beat. She looked at it, already wrapped in gloom, and smiled, thinking within herself: "The foolish old monster! Doesn't it know that the spirit of Abel is upon me!"

Then she hurried on, and soon came to a stile that gave egress from the wood. In front of her was a small bay of grass-

covered land, about an acre and a half in extent, with a gentle slope to the river; the wooded hill ran all round it, except on its river side. In the centre, on a natural mound, was a small stone cottage imbedded in ivy, with the tiniest of flower-gardens in front. Ordinarily it made a pretty picture enough, especially when the sun was on the trees and the water; but when the sky was clouded, and the light had left the ground, and only lingered in broken gleams on the murmuring river, and the steep, hanging wood cast its black shadow all over the grassy cove, the feeble glimmer of the candle through the uncurtained window of the cottage, visible from the highway on the other side of the Scarthin, induced an uncomfortable sense of eeriness in most belated travellers. The candle glimmered at all hours of the night, but the lonely little cot was free from all intruders, partly on account of its out-of-the-way situation as regarded strangers, tramps, and vagabonds, and partly on account of its inhabitant as regarded the natives; for here lived in dreary loneliness the White Witch of Voe, Dame Betty Iper-son. Poachers and gamekeepers often saw the "Witch's Eye," as they called the candlelight, but they gave it a wide berth, and they would have crossed themselves had they been good Catholics instead of honest Protestants. Of all nocturnal wanderers, Abel Boden alone ever ventured to knock at the door of Betty's cottage.

Ruth stood on the edge of the wood, and her heart began to palpitate furiously; the semicircular plot of fertile meadow-land was transformed into a restless, foam-flecked lake. Nearly opposite to the cottage the Scarthin made a pretty sharp bend; but the Scarthin was no longer in existence, and in its place was a devouring ravine that knew no bounds like unto those of the Scarthin, and it came on strong as a tide, swift as a race-horse, and with the voice of muffled thunder. At a distance it seemed to be heading straight for Dame Betty's cottage, but luckily the torrent struck about two hundred yards higher up: the land between the river and the wood was high and rocky about there, and effectually barred all farther progress of the torrent in that direction. The waters raged and roared, but all in vain; they had to accommodate themselves to circumstances, which they did by rushing back at an acute angle, and then sweeping with a hissing sound right across the front of the little grass-covered bay.

There was no light in the cottage, and no smoke issued from its solitary chimney, and already the water was several feet above the doorstep. The only sign of life within was the dismal howling of a dog at short intervals, which the girl con-

cluded came from Gypsy, Dame Betty's ancient and ugly Skye terrier, whom the natives called the "Witch's familiar." Ruth called at the top of her voice a number of times, but no one answered save the dog, who gave a series of short barks, and then fell to whining and howling dolefully. "If I am not already too late, I soon shall be," murmured Ruth, looking round despairingly. How to get to the cottage she did not know, but somehow or other it had to be done; she had not undergone the terrible strain of the last hour merely to turn aside at the point of danger. She felt sure that Abel would soon come to her, but in the mean time the minutes were too precious to be lost. The waters were still rising quickly, and from the way in which she could see them washing against the cottage, it seemed as if the walls must soon collapse and the whole place be swept away.

As the crow flies, Ruth was not more than half a mile from Carbel Chase, whence a footpath ran straight through the wood and down to the river-side. The path left the wood on the opposite side of the grassy cove to where Ruth stood. Janoca Phythian was fond of the water, and liked to boat on the Scarthin on summer evenings; the Phythians' was the only boat kept on the river for some miles. There were two boat-houses—one beside the river, where the boat was kept in summer, and another just within the wood, where the boat was stored in winter. The river-side house was probably long since washed away, and if not it was buried twelve feet in water. But there was every chance that the boat was still in its winter quarters. This thought it was which started Ruth running through the wood to get to the other side of what was now an actual watery bay.

When she got to the boat-house, she was not farther than a hundred yards from the rocky point against which the torrent rushed only to recoil with a roar and a hiss. The sight and sound of the tumbling, foaming waters were sickening to Ruth, and for some moments she stood irresolute. Presently she stooped and picked up a heavy stone, and struck deftly the padlock that secured the door of the boat-house. A few strokes were sufficient to break the lock, and then she opened the door and went in. She had found her courage. To her joy there was the boat sitting on its stays, and a dozen oars were resting in their rack. Ruth released with some difficulty the boat from the tarpaulin that enwrapped it, chose a pair of the lightest oars she could find, and then for the first time asked herself how she was going to get the boat out of the house, and over the wall that bounded the wood, and so into the bay. At the far

end of the house were two wide doors fronting the river, and from the doors to the grass-land below was a wooden incline, grooved and furnished with rollers; a small windlass pulled the boat from the stays along rollers to the doors, and then passed it down the incline, and drew it through the grass to the water's-edge. It was Janoca's plan of launching her own boat by herself. Ruth, however, was unable to utilize this mechanical arrangement, because three feet below the doors the torrent, just recovered from its recoil, went rushing along with big waves upon its back—waves which at intervals dashed themselves against the doors, and made the boat-house shake again.

It took an immense amount of tugging and lifting, but at length the girl got the boat out into the wood, and reared it against the wall, through which the water was now pouring into the wood. It was a tremendous heft to raise the boat on to the wall and push it over, but somehow she managed it; on the other side, the boat had only about a foot to fall ere it rested on the water, that was now at least eight feet deep at this the mouth of the bay. Across the wall, Ruth held with one hand the boat, which floated beautifully, she thought, while with the other hand she lifted in the oars and fitted them into the rowlocks; then she mounted the wall, stepped into the boat, seated herself quickly, seized the oars and—heigho! before she could wet her oars the little skiff was half across the bay, and was headed across the river. She seemed to be going like an express train; but oddly enough, the boat did not cleave the water, but was swept along, motionless. The truth broke upon her with the sensation of a glare of lightning in her eyes—she was at the mercy of the flood!

CHAPTER XXII

THE CONSEQUENCES

SHE seized the oars, and put all the strength of despair into her stroke, but without avail; as well might one attempt to stop an express train by pushing with all his might against the cushioned seat. The boat was borne swiftly along right into the river, which was the fierce heart of the torrent. The girl's glance went out over the wild waste of water, and the nearest green strips of land seemed a long way off—too far for her feet ever more to tread them. The dull gray light of day had given place to the duller and grayer light of evening; it was still pouring with rain, and black-faced storm-clouds were moving solemnly over the tops of the hills. A woeful dreary world it looked; a sad and melancholy night for the soul to start out all alone on its long, mysterious journey. And what a trist fate, elling, sombre, and pitiful, to go down into the flood, while yet one was young and full of health and hope, and be picked out a dripping, cold corpse! It went through her brain like fire, and she clasped her hands, and closed her eyes, and lifted her pale face heavenward, and moaned in utter despair.

"You were a fool for troubling yourself at all about the White Witch. You haven't saved her life, and you have lost your own. And jolly well right it serves you."

Some one in the boat, behind her, spoke these words distinctly. Ruth heard every syllable, and gave a great start, and turned round on her seat, and gazed about her in a curious fashion: no one was in the boat—visibly—but herself. Oddly enough, the voice was that of Am Ende, though there is reason to believe that the real speaker was *Monsieur le Diable*. Ruth began to tremble; and no wonder! To the ear, she spake not a word; but a swift and strong controversy was going on within her. And to the listening spirit, invisible but eager and alert, the poor child rushing to her death made answer, stumbling and pathetic, but brave and honorable and a glory to her young womanhood. "Yes, I was foolish to try to do it alone, but nobody else thought of her. I tried to do what I felt I ought to, and God and—Abel won't blame me, and won't forget me."

Monsieur has fallen low, very low, if all that is writ of him be true, but there is still something of the gentleman left in him. And when he got his answer, he went like the wind, and left poor Ruth to meet her doom. The boat was being carried along so swiftly and quietly that Ruth did not realize her instant danger, and thought only of Voe bridge; it was there, almost in sight of the mill and the smithery, that she looked to meet her death. The arches at Voe were wide, and there was just a chance that the boat would clear them; but even then, two miles lower down there was an iron bridge across the river at the rapids, supported by nine iron pillars, that stood in threes diagonally across the Scarthin. No human power could steer the boat safely through that network of iron columns.

It was better a thousand times, she thought, to fall against the gray and green stonework at Voe, and die at home, as it were, than to be carried away and done to death under that grim and strange-looking structure, that did not seem to belong naturally to that part of the country, and of which she had never heard man, woman, or child say a kind or affectionate or proud word. Many such words she had heard of her own village bridge; she loved it with a quite distinct and peculiar affection; and even now, when she expected in a few minutes that the old bridge would smash her boat and cast her helpless into the jaws of death, she invested it with a sentiment of pity and sympathy.

She looked round and saw she was already within half a mile of the bridge, and the flood was hurrying her on, as it swept along with a dull internal roar, but with scarcely a ripple on its dark face now, broad, deep, cruel, and irresistible. The girl bent her head, covered her face with her hands, and sat waiting for the end. She thought of nothing. Images innumerable chased each other across her brain, but they formed no part of her life; they composed themselves into no real consciousness. Her true and real life seemed to be withdrawn from the outer world and centred in one acute point, that seemed to be removed leagues and leagues away from the flood and the boat, even from her sensitive hands and face. She might have been already dead; and her fluttering soul, already lost in light, might have been watching from afar, with curious interest, the fate of its recent fleshly temple, still to mortal seeming the habitation of a human spirit.

Suddenly there was a great shout, and looking up, Ruth saw a man on horseback on the highway. He jumped the hedge and came down the meadow to the brink of the flood; he sat in his saddle gesticulating wildly. Ruth could hear him shout-

ing to her, but the roar of the water drowned his words. She spread out her hands, and told him her helplessness and despair in the primitive and universal dialect of gesture, which none but professional actors misrepresent, and none but natural idiots can misunderstand.

The brave fellow actually tried to force his horse into the flood; but that sagacious animal rose to the occasion, and supplied common-sense for himself and his rider, and absolutely refused to commit suicide. Then the man turned away, and putting spurs to his horse, rode at full gallop toward Voe. Ruth watched him making with headlong speed for the village by a much nearer way than the course of the river, and she wondered if the unknown horseman was the last person she would see on earth. That he would be able to reach Voe in time for them to do anything to save her would be utterly impossible. Perhaps she would see a few eager faces on the bridge; perhaps she would hear—a willow catkin brushed her face—a host of slender boughs bent as she rushed through them—bump went the boat full tilt against a submerged branch of a large white willow, and over the side of the boat shot Ruth! The boat, bottom upward, went rushing along, while Ruth clung desperately to the slender and swaying, but happily tough, branches of the willow.

Now, for the first time, did she know the fury and strength and pressure of the flood. It pulled her out straight, so that she lay on the water at full length, while her muscles stretched as if she had been on the rack. In a few minutes she was in fearful agony. She endeavored to bend her arms and draw herself nearer to the branches, but the weight and force of the water kept her rigid. The willows bent to a strange angle, but they were full of fibre and they held. Also her muscles held. But she was in torture; and what was the use of holding on? Death itself began to show as a sweet ease, a delicious cessation of agony.

She half relaxed her hold with one hand, and in another twenty seconds would have been past saving, when she heard a sound that killed for one instant all sense of pain, and sent life surging through her frame like a strong current of electricity. It was the cry of an owl, weird and melancholy and far-sounding—true to the life, save that the last notes were tied together in a way that no bird ever joined them. *It was Abel's cry*, and it came out of the wood, almost opposite to where Ruth was. She gathered all her strength, and sent out an answering cry that woke the echoes.

Abel striding quickly along, full of anxiety for Ruth, heard

it, and stood like a setter. It was Ruth's cry, he was certain; but it sounded like a death-cry of pain. And where on earth did it come from? It seemed quite near; indeed it might have issued from the very body of the flood. He gave another call, and listened. There was no answer. Again he sent his owl-notes wailing through the air. Yes, his quick ears caught a feeble "Ho-o-o-o!" followed by "Abel! Abel!"

"My God! she's in the flood," he gasped.

Heedless of the encroaching water, Abel sprang forward, and mounting the wall, swept with his keen glance the darkening surface of the flood below. No ordinary vision would have been able to recognize the outline of Ruth's form in that long, black shadow, stretching out from the willow-tree almost in front of him. But Abel's vision was extraordinary, and he knew in a flash it was Ruth. He did not know whether she would hear him, but he sent out his cry again, and then making a trumpet with his hands, he shouted: "Hold tight! I'm coming, love!"

Down from the wall he came, and tore along the path for some few hundred yards; it was no use entering the water where he had stood; no mortal man could cleave a straight line across the flood. Off went coat and waistcoat, and trousers and shirt, while his boot-laces—they were called patent porpoise-laces by the manufacturer, and warranted not to break—snapped like cotton threads. He stood erect on the wall for a few seconds, clad only in his stockings and close-fitting woollen underwear, and measured the distance between him and his love.

"Thank God, she is on this side the river! And if I don't save her I'll die trying to." He made a leap, and went like a dart into ten feet of water on the edge of the flood.

Abel could swim like a fish—and a fine sight better. A man that knows his business can beat the best fish in the water at swimming. But the flood—ah me! such of the fishes as had not got snugly housed in their crystal homes, and were once caught in the mighty current, these gave it up at once as a bad job, and met their fate with what of dignity a drowned fish could display. No fish, only a man and he a brave lover, dare take to the flood and hope to live.

Luckily for Abel, he had not to pit himself against the central current in the body of the Scarthin. The willow to which Ruth clung was on the edge of the river, and at ordinary times there was a bank of dry sand below where she now lay floating on the top of a torrent twenty feet in depth. Abel fought his way until he was in a line with Ruth, then he gave himself to

the flood, and in ten seconds he was right among the branches of the tree. He seized a stout branch that hung a foot or more above the water, and at the same moment he got his feet firmly planted on another branch below the water, and there he clung. The boughs bent and swayed, and the torrent pressed him hard, but he had a good balance and a grip like steel. At his feet lay Ruth. Her face was white, but she smiled faintly as she looked up and saw her lover almost over her.

"Darling, I've only one hand to help you with. If you can hold it I think I can pull you in."

"I think I can hold, love, if you will be quick. The pain is killing me," answered Ruth.

He took a fresh hold of his bough, bent forward, and put out his left arm.

For a moment Ruth hesitated. "I shall pull you down, love," she moaned, in dreadful pain.

Abel seized her wrist, and tried to draw her toward him, but Ruth gave an involuntary scream.

"You will drag my arm out," she cried.

"O Ruth, do be sensible! Hold my wrist with both hands, and I can save you."

She did as she was told, and Abel put forth all the strength he could command in his ticklish position, and made a strong pull and a steady and a long. It was of no use. The flood could beat Abel at pulling.

"I can't do it yet, Ruth. Can you hold on again to the willow a bit, while I get some breath?" gasped Abel.

"No, love; never mind. I'm tired," murmured Ruth. Her hold on Abel suddenly was loosened, and she went like a flash.

For one awful moment Abel stood horrorstruck, before he threw himself headlong after her. The rush of the torrent bore her up, and Abel caught her ere she sank. His arm went round her, and she lay against him perfectly quiet; she might have been dead, so still was she. Abel drew her close to him and lay upon the water, and as they were swept along he looked up at the sky and at the trees, and told himself that the wind had changed, and they would have fine weather probably tomorrow at Voe. It had already ceased raining, and over the narrow valley hung a slowly moving cloud that was black as night itself, and covered as with a pall woods and waters, fields and houses, cattle and men.

There was something almost delightful—fearfully and deliciously delightful—in keeping Ruth and himself afloat, and letting the deep bellowing spate bear them along. Abel heard voices and men shouting on both sides of the flood, and he

wondered, as one in a dream might wonder, if they were shouting to him. Of course he was in danger, and would have to make an effort soon; but there was no great hurry—the flood was carrying them along beautifully! As for drowning, the idea was absurd, and fit only for a fish. And Ruth, how sweetly quiet she was! Any other girl would have screamed, and floundered, and clutched him wildly; perhaps, after all, she had been in the water long enough, ay, or even—*too long*. Something snapped in his ears with a sharp twang—it was the delicious, dreamy, dangerous spell that had been luring him to death. He peered close into Ruth's face; her eyes were closed, and she made no movement of life when he called her by name again and again.

"Oh, what a fool! I believe I've been asleep on the top of the flood! We must get out of this pretty quick somehow, or it will be all up with us both," said Abel within himself, as he clutched Ruth firmly, and looked out over the dark waters for some means of salvation. Another moment and a light branch whisked across his face; he snatched quickly at it, touched it with the tips of his fingers, and it was gone. More than once he grasped a slender branch in his hand, and held on with all the strength of his strong muscles; but the branches slipped through his wet fingers, and the mighty torrent, with a local hiss of anger, hurried him and his precious burden onward.

"Now," thought Abel, "it begins to look queer. As I grow weak the spate grows strong; and I'm thinking we shall be at the bridge in a jiffy, and then one bump and the game's up. Those fellows are shouting as if they saw us, which they surely can't, seeing I'm the only fellow in Voe with cat's eyes. I wonder could I raise a shout?" He sent forth a curious mixture of a noise, half yell and half cry, that travelled through the darkness, shrill and weird, and made more than one stout heart shake. There came back answering shouts, that sounded a long way off; and Abel had no more spare energy at hand.

Suddenly there loomed up in front of him a column of blackness, which looked like a human figure standing erect on the top of the flood; as he drew near he could see its arms outstretched, as if to bar the way. The dark, strange figure now seemed to rush upon them: it was uncanny to look upon, and Abel held his breath for the first time in his life with a sensation of fear. Another moment and Abel was hurled with great force against the black form. It was curiously smooth and soft, and yielded to the pressure like a feather bed. The instant he touched it Abel knew what it was. It was the trunk of a decayed crab-tree, that grew on a knoll in the meadow between

the bridge and the wood, and was covered with a dense growth of ivy. Abel thrust his arm deep into the ivy, and got a strong hold upon a thick stem.

"Thank God for a bit of breathing-time! Though I'm thinking I can't hold on long. This beastly spate pulls like a crane," said Abel, as he tried to ease the tremendous strain of the current by crowding Ruth and himself deeper into the ivy. It was preternaturally dark, he thought, as he glanced at the sinister canopy of storm-cloud overhead. He was unable to discern the outline of the bridge, which was not more than three hundred yards distant, though he could distinctly catch the peculiar sound of the waters as they struck the huge buttresses, and failed back upon the low meadow-lands on either side.

There were people on the bridge, and on Yewdle Brig road, which was high and dry, and not farther from the crab-tree than a good thrower could send a cricket-ball; as the breeze favored him, he could hear the hum of their voices. He put his head as far round the tree as he well could, and when the breeze seemed in the right direction he sent out a long, wailing cry. Instantly there came a great shout from the bridge; they had heard him and knew he was alive. Abel made another wailing cry, hoping that it would enable them to guess his whereabouts and condition. He heard them shouting to him from half a dozen points, but he could make out nothing they said.

Presently every sound died away, and nothing was in his ear but the awful roar of the flood; and Abel began to think that the villagers had renounced all hope of saving him and Ruth, what with the fearful height of the torrent and the appalling darkness that filled the valley. And yet, he thought, it was not like Christopher Kneebone to desert a fellow at a pinch; he had stood by Kneebone when he was hard pushed on the hillside, and it would be odd if Kneebone did not do him as good a service. All the same, the total cessation of all human sound made a horrible silence. And the silence only accentuated the fact that the muscles of Abel's right arm, with which he clung to the ivy, were beginning to feel as though they were cords of fire imbedded in his quivering flesh. In a few minutes, at the longest, he would be compelled to let loose, and then—ha! what sound is that?

The friends and neighbors of Abel Boden and his cousin Ruth had not deserted them in their hour of peril. Several loungers on the bridge, watching the flood, had noticed a horseman coming toward Voe at a furious gallop. As he drew

nearer, first the horse was recognized as Squire Saxton's black thoroughbred mare, and then the rider was made out to be none other than the squire himself; he was bare-headed, and was seen to be urging his flying horse with the whip. This made no little sensation among the onlookers, who judged that there was certainly something up. Excitement is exciting, if only in the way in which it swiftly collects material to work upon. A small crowd gathered in no time at the Voe end of the road. In a few moments the squire came dashing into the village.

"There's a boat coming down with the flood, and a girl in it!" he shouted, as he drew rein.

At this every man, woman, and child gave a quick gasp of horror, and looked at each other hopelessly.

"We must save her. Do you hear, men? we must save her!"

"Ay, sir; but what mun we do?"

"I'll tell you." And he told them.

In fifteen minutes all Voe was on the bridge, save some of the best swimmers, who went out to skirt the edge of the flood, watching and hoping for a chance of snatching the poor girl from the jaws of death. Who was she? At first nobody knew, and then in a trice everybody knew. It was Ruth Boden. In the same mysterious manner everybody knew at the same moment that Abel Boden had gone after her. Presently the boat came rushing along, bottom upward; by the same token poor Ruth was either dead or with Abel.

The strange darkness came, and they could see nothing, and do nothing but shout and shout again, with small hope of any answer other than the mocking echo. The children cowered, the women wept, the men moved here and there restlessly, and talked only in whispers. Among them were the squire, and Balthasar Phythian, Ruth's new lover, and Christopher Kneebone. Of a sudden every heart stood still, as out of the very heart of the roaring flood came a human cry, half yell, half wail. They shouted back, but there was no answer; and many thought it was poor Abel Boden's soul that made that strange cry as it was taking its flight from earth. By-and-by came two more cries, and they knew then that Abel still lived, and they guessed that he was holding on to some tree or other. The excitement was intense. Whereabouts was he? Had he got Ruth with him? How could they rescue him? He seemed to be pretty near, somewhere in the meadow-lands below; they called out to him, but got no reply. Evidently he could not hear them.

The squire, Kneebone, and Balthasar held a council in the middle of the bridge; orders were given quickly, and in a few

seconds the crowded bridge was absolutely deserted. This occasioned the dreadful silence that sent a chill to Abel's heart. But the silence was soon broken. On to the bridge came pouring men and women, dragging ropes, carrying beams of wood, and bundles of thick sticks, and rags, and even sheets, and cans of paraffin-oil and petroleum, while others wheeled a barrel of tar. Many lanterns were flitting about and moving up and down; so that altogether it was a curious scene—a moving drama in the darkness.

The word was passed for silence, and the low hubbub ceased as Kneebone ran on to the bridge with a sea-captain's speaking-trumpet in his hand. He put the trumpet to his mouth, and over the waters went booming the words:

"Ahoy, there! Abel, my lad, where are you? Give us a signal."

For some brief space of time there was no reply, and then there came from out of the roaring waters Abel's owl-cry, more weird and melancholy than the cry of any bird. Yet to the listeners on the bridge it sounded sweeter than any lark-song or cuckoo-call, and a great shout of joy drowned for a time the thunder of the flood.

Another silence fell on the crowd.

"Is Ruth Boden with you?" shouted Kneebone through his trumpet. "Give us the same call if she is."

A cold shiver ran through the crowd. There was a dreadful spell of silence ere the same weird cry came out of the darkness with startling distinctness. A great thrill went through the crowd, followed by a distinct sound that was partly sigh and partly sob, and after that came a mighty roar that finally articulated itself into a thundering hurrah.

Another sudden silence.

"Hold on, lad, five minutes longer," shouted Kneebone. Then he turned to the crowd and said:

"Now, my lads, to work in no time, and if we get them out there is a pound apiece for you to-morrow morning."

They needed no wage to prompt their humanity; but they worked none the slower and none the less willingly for Kneebone's promise of a pound a head. They made dozens of torches and dropped them over the bridge, holding them with strings, so that the face of the waters gleamed with light all about the arches. To long beams of wood they fastened strong cords, and these they lowered to within a foot of the water: they stretched across the entire front of the three central arches. They made rope-chairs with boarded seats; and half a dozen brave fellows were instantly ready to be fastened into the chairs

and lowered until their feet were in the water: all this in the hope that Abel might be able to seize them, or they Abel, and so save him from going under the bridge.

The current at the bridge was something fearful to contemplate; yet it was there he had to be saved, or not at all. In a very few minutes all was ready. The torches flamed and glared, and threw weird lights upon the front of the bridge, and over the wide waste of water about it. Men and women held the ropes that held the torches and the beams and the chairs.

Holding a torch aloft in his left hand, Kneebone put up his trumpet to his mouth. Instantly there was a dead silence.

"Abel, do you see our plan? There are planks afore the arches held with ropes. Do you think you can catch on?"

In a few moments the strange cry came back in response, but it seemed very feeble.

"Give us a call when you are ready, and come on, my lad, and God help you!" shouted Kneebone. Then to the crowd he said: "Now, lads, to the rescue! Keep quiet, and keep your eyes open. We ought to see them twenty yards at least."

Half a minute went by, and then Abel's cry came moaning out of the darkness. A thrill went through the crowd, and every eye was fixed on the black, rushing torrent below. There was a short and painful silence, during which no one stirred a muscle, and every one seemed to hold his breath. Suddenly Kneebone's voice rang out:

"Look alive! there they come! the middle arch, lads—the middle arch! A hundred pounds to the man who stops them. My lad, my darling lad, keep cool, keep cool!"

On they came, in the very middle of the flood, a dark, struggling mass, lit up by the glare of the torches. "He's got it." "He's missed." "Yes." "No." "Yes."

"Help, help! in God's name, help!"

The cry came from a brave fellow lashed into a rope-chair. He had caught Abel as he fell loose from the beam, and now was holding on to him by his flannel vest with one hand. It was a task that would have beaten the strength of a Samson.

Instantly Kneebone seized a rope attached to the plank from which Abel's grasp had slipped, and bidding the men who held it to keep a firm grip, he swung himself over the bridge and slid down on to the plank. Abel was beyond his reach, but not so Ruth. He seized her by the shoulder, and together the two men did their level best to lift the arm-locked lovers on to the plank. But it was all in vain, until another arm was suddenly outstretched, and its hand took hold of Abel's shoulder.

"Now then, all together! One—two—three, and—heave Oh!" said a voice which Kneebone knew at once belonged to Gentleman Phythian. Slowly, slowly, slowly they came! It was like pulling up a tree by its roots. The water-demon hugged them tighter than any soil; but the three men knew they were heaving two lives from death. Up, up, up they brought them, until, O joy, Abel was seated on the plank, still supporting Ruth, who lay upon him unconscious! Kneebone and Phythian knelt upon the plank, and supported Abel and Ruth; while from the bridge they lowered brandy to the man in the chair, who swung to and fro as he poured it into a little pewter measure ere he gave it to Ruth and Abel.

With infinite trouble and danger the three men got ropes carefully fastened about Ruth, and she was hauled up safely on to the bridge. It was almost equal trouble to get up Abel, for he was utterly spent, and helpless as a kitten. After him came Phythian and Kneebone, and finally the man in the chair. The crowd did no cheering now; the men laughed hysterically, and shook each by the hand, while the women made no bones about it, but just cried sweetly for joy. Ruth, of course, they took home, and the doctor went with her; but at Kneebone's order Abel was carried to Rook's Nest. As Kneebone was walking up the hill a little in the rear of Abel, Nathan Wass came to his side, and taking his hand, said in a low tone:

"Blacksmith, thou wast once a shepherd, I'm thinking, and went by the same name as thy son there. O thou dear rogue, thou dear rogue! There, I'll see thee to-morrow, Abel Boden."

CHAPTER XXIII

IN FRONT OF THE FORGE

ABEL's forecast was right: there was fine weather the next day. The clouds rolled away as if by magic, unveiling a sky of the tenderest blue imaginable. As went the clouds, so went the waters; and twelve hours after the scene on the bridge, the Scarthin was itself again, a small, sweet-voiced, picturesque, dear old thing. And Dame Betty Iperson dragged herself downstairs, as, fortunately, she dragged herself up, and to her amazement found herself able to totter about the house again, and put things to rights. But where the spate had been, the grass was covered with a dark-colored slimy mud, which emitted for some days a disagreeable odor. When the miller reached home, some hours later than he had expected, he found Ruth in bed: she was conscious, but the doctor forbade all conversation. As for Abel, in two days he was on his legs again, and seemed as fit as ever.

The evening after the rescue was a memorable one in Voe. As it happened, it was May-day. The sun was a good hour from the horizon, when all Voe gathered itself in open meeting, under the big tree in front of the smithy: in a cart were seated the squire, and Gentleman Phythian, and Christopher Kneebone; by the cart-shafts stood Nathan Wass, tall, venerable of aspect, with a look of renewed youth and unmistakable happiness upon his hale old visage. Miller Boden was conspicuous by his absence. Presently there was a cry of "Hats off!" as Squire Saxton rose to address the meeting.

"No, my friends, keep your hats on; the sun is still warm."

At this some one shouted: "Three cheers for the squire!" which were given with a will. The meeting was evidently emotional and highly sympathetic.

Said the squire: "I am not much of a speech-maker, and I am not here to make a speech; I will leave that to others who can do it better than I can. I came to support our friend here, the blacksmith." (Cheers.) "He is a new man, and with new men go new ways. But he has shown himself to be of the right metal." (Loud cheers.) "And I think that if we suit him he will suit us." (Loud cheers.)

"I will now introduce to you Mr. Christopher Kneebone."

Kneebone rose to his feet, and moved to the front of the cart very deliberately. He was dressed, I believe, in the very same suit of dark-blue serge that he wore at the great sale; his fingers played with his chestnut beard, and many of the Voese noted that the wooden toothpick was still between his teeth: it may be as well to observe that, in all probability, this toothpick was *not* the same as the one he munched at the sale. When the cheering died away, he said:

"Men and women and children of Voe, I want to thank the squire for what he said about me, and I want to thank you for the way in which you said, 'It is a vote.' I like a unanimous vote when it is in my favor." (Laughter.) "I'm glad to hear I suit you; and I will say this to your faces though it cost me your friendship—you suit me first rate!" (Laughter and cheers.) "This, it seems, is a sort of love-meeting, and I am going to make love to you all. So, if there's a jealous husband here, I would advise him to escort his wife home immediately." (Roars of laughter.) "Of course a foreigner like me"—(here he glanced at Nathan Wass, who cried, "Hear, hear" with gusto)—"cannot be expected to find out the best qualities of country and people all at once; but some children can eat sweetmeats quicker than others. Yes, I see you've caught on. And so all I will say on that point is—I am one of those children! I've tasted you and your country, and, God knows, I find you sweeter than the honeycomb." (Tremendous applause.) "Now I've something else to say. My friends, look at the Scarthin. Look at the sky. Could any two things in the world have changed more than they have in the last twenty-four hours? Yet I know one thing that has undergone as great a change, and that is my heart, my hope, my outlook on life. This time last night I thought it was all over with him—them, both of them. Why do I feel so strongly about it? Why, they were both so young, so good, so brave! If the lad were my own flesh and blood, I couldn't love him more than I do."

There was a tremor in the speaker's voice, and somehow the women began to snivel, while the men glanced at each other suspiciously, and their features became demoralized. After a pause, continued Kneebone:

"There, we will change the subject a bit. I've not forgotten that, last night, I promised every man of you a pound apiece."

At this there was an outburst of cries. "We dunna want it." "We wunna have it." "We wunna rob a man like that." "The will's as good as the deed."

Said Kneebone: "Friends, it's just like you to talk like that. I like you none the worse for it. But I'm a man of my word. And I can stand it. Don't fret; it will none break me. There's a good trade doing at the forge here, which brings in enough to keep an old bachelor fellow like me in luxury to the end of the chapter. So you will just make no bones about it, but take your sovereign and be thankful you earned it." (Loud cheers.) "There are a lot of women here to-night; and I'm thinking they were with us last night. They held ropes, they carried wood, they made torches; they faced the pelting rain, and the strange and awful darkness that fell upon us; and altogether they showed themselves to be your fit mates. Men, I'm not going to back down on the women. I'm going to ask them to do me the favor of accepting a gold sovereign apiece as a keepsake."

Then there was cheering, if you like! The men had cheered at their own good luck; but at the luck of their wives and sweethearts, and mothers and sisters, their enthusiasm rose like a spate, and round after round of cheering went echoing into the woods. Simple and unlettered were the Voese—rude and crude; on principle wearing their manners and their morals with the rough side out. Still, they were of such kind and quality of human stuff that, though they were in the habit of daily remembering that there were two halfpence to every penny, it was not the extra sovereign that touched them. It was the sentiment of the thing—the manly, loyal, Anglo-Saxon reverence and chivalry in regard of womanhood. In the sympathetic understanding of which the English prince has no priority over the English peasant, nor the English gentleman over the English boor; it is the divine birth-gift of the race. And, by the same token, a man may still be proud of being an Englishman.

It was some time before Kneebone could go on. When they had quieted down he said:

"I wasn't going to stop that cheering—not a bit of it. I know well enough what set you going and what kept you going, and, to tell you the truth, I did a bit of cheering myself! But now, try and keep quiet till I've done, and I won't say much more. I am going to give two pounds apiece to every one of you that sat in a rope-chair. As for my friend there, Tim Blackum the pedler, he saved my—both their lives. I owe him a hundred pounds!" A burst of hurrahs. "I'll pay him what I owe him to-morrow, at the same time as I settle with all of you; and I hope that instead of three donkeys, Tim will drive from this day forward a string of six."

"A few more words and then I've done. Friends, I feel I want to do something on my own account to commemorate the blessed rescue. If I were a millionaire and lived in a big city, I'd build—I don't know what; a cathedral, I think, or a great hospital. I must be content, however, to do what I can. I'll tell you what I've been thinking of. In the summer we are all right—we can lounge in the open of an evening. But in winter there is no place open to us but the Nag's Head. When we want to have a social glass, the Nag's Head is a first-rate place to get it in. But it isn't always that we want a glass; happen we should sometimes be better without it. Well, now, I will tell you what I thought of doing. I haven't had time yet to work it all out clearly in my mind, but I'll give you a rough idea of what I'm thinking of. You can talk it over among yourselves, and I shall be glad to listen to any suggestions you may have to make. My notion is to build a big stone building, larger and handsomer than anything they ever dreamt of in Yewdle Brig." (Cheers.) "I would christen it Memorial Hall, and give it to the parish, to be used by the people of Voe forever. Half of the building should be for the use of males, and half for females. There should be coffee-rooms, rooms for games such as chess and dominos and suchlike, billiard-rooms, music-rooms, reading-rooms, smoking-rooms, a skittle-alley, a gymnasium, and first-rate swimming-baths, and—I don't know what else. Anything in reason that could be thought of, as likely to be of real service, whether for comfort, instruction, or amusement. And it shan't cost one of you a penny. All I ask is, Will you use it honestly and fairly if I give it you?"

"Yes." "Yes." "We will." "Try us." "Trust us." "Kneebone forever!" "Hip, hip, hip, hurrah!" And three hundred voices swelled the cry.

From his waistcoat-pocket Kneebone drew forth a fresh, clean, spear-pointed Yankee toothpick, and put it between his teeth: there was a smile on his face, and a pleasant light in his soft gray eyes.

"Thank you," he said. "Then it's a bargain. There's but one difficulty—where shall we build it? My idea is that the prettiest site in the village is there, in the Ox-croft."

He pointed to a rich tree-studded pasture, about two acres in size, a little higher up the road. Instantly all eyes were riveted on Squire Saxton. Continued Kneebone:

"I would put up a fine Gothic building, one that would show well from Owlcote Park. I wonder if we could persuade our squire to sell me the Ox-croft? I'll pay him his own price

for it. He paused, and turned round and looked at the squire.

There was a dead silence for nearly half a minute; it seemed a very long time to the crowd. Slowly the squire rose, and came a step or two forward. He looked at the crowd below him for some moments without speaking. Then he said:

"We are not strangers to each other. You know that the Saxtons never sell their land. We buy and we keep. The money value of the Ox-croft—it is one of the best bits of land in the parish—is very little to me compared with the land itself. But—well—I didn't dream we had such a wealthy blacksmith in the place, nor such a generous blacksmith. What he proposes to do will be a very novel experiment in a small village like Voe. But I think the spirit of the thing is noble—noble and fine, and it commands my sympathy. As to the Ox-croft"—turning to Kneebone, "do you really want it?"

"It is the best site in the village, squire."

"Well—it's against my principle to sell land. But I will tell you what I will do—I WILL GIVE IT TO YOU."

As he sat down, Kneebone sprang up. "Think of it—all the beautiful Ox-croft for a pleasure-ground! We will have a tennis-court, and a fives-court, and a place for flowers, and a fountain with gold and silver fish. Now then, for the squire—Hip, hip, hip, hurrah! And again—Hip, hip, hip, hurrah! And again—Hip, hip, hip, hurrah!"

Never was such shouting heard in Voe before. They sang the National Anthem through, from end to end, and marched through the village singing, in equal honor of the squire and Kneebone: "For he's a jolly good fellow." And they were about right.

After the meeting, Kneebone had been in the house but a short time when Nathan Wass called: except at the meeting, they had not met since the previous night. Kneebone met him at the front door, under the porch that was covered with red honeysuckle not yet in flower.

"Ha! good evening. You are the man that can see a hole through a ladder. Will you come in?"

Said Nathan, in a low voice: "Where's the lad?"

"In bed and asleep."

"You have a housekeeper?"

"She is out—just gone. Won't be back for an hour."

"O thou dear rogue! thou dear rogue! To think thou art really back again at the owd wum! To think thou hast been here these months, and I didna know it! O lad, lad! I've lived for naught else but to put eyes on thee once more," said

the old man, holding Kneebone's hand in both his own, and speaking with a quiver of joy in his voice. Kneebone's other hand came atop of Nathan's; laughter was in his voice and tears in his eyes, as he said:

"Dear old man, how know'st that I am—anybody?"

"I stood nigh thee on th' brig, and heard thee pray God in a small voice to 'save my lad!' Thinks I, I know that voice. I looked hard at thee, and our eyes met. Lord! a straw would ha' felled me. I knew thee, lad, in a flash. Though thou art altered—wondrously altered." Then they went indoors, and there followed the talk of talks—the talk of the returned wanderer after long years of absence. The old man listened to Kneebone spellbound, as he told of his wide travels, his strange adventures, his many perils; of how he made money and lost it, and made it again.

"The shepherd in me—well, Nathan, it came to be as a dream that I had ever been a simple Peakshire shepherd. Yet, in a way, it has clung to me to the last. Gold-diggings and silver-mines and cattle-raising—what I got from them I lost again. But wool, Nathan, wool has made me. The money it brought in stuck to me like pitch. I guess it was the shepherd in me that did it."

Said Nathan, later on: "But hanna the time come now for thee to step out afore th' world as th' lad's father?"

"That's a meal I'm mightily hungry for, Nathan; but I won't eat it yet. I want to see how Luke is going to shape himself about my lad. I'm suspicious he means mischief. But I'm not sure, and I wouldn't misjudge him for anything. I must know exactly where I stand as regards Luke, when I make myself known. At present I'm in a fog. I am Christopher Kneebone."

CHAPTER XXIV

QUETZALCOATL

IT was a pious belief with Janoca Phythian that if she was out of bed after eleven o'clock, the next day invariably found the exquisite health of her body and soul distinctly impaired; that her physical and moral constitution lost tone and balance; and that it was her right and duty to conclude with her conscience a twenty-four hours' truce of God. Did her thoughts sit brooding low, or run only among the brown furrows and the springing grasses, and absolutely refuse to take wing and soar and sing? Did she fail in devotion, and neglect her daily meditation, forget the sick, and refuse the needy; uncharitably suspect the butler of receiving a percentage on the tradesmen's bills, or accuse Phœbe, the dainty housemaid, of unbecoming freedom of deportment toward the married gardener, William the silent, and the sly? For these things, while the white flag fluttered, she declined to be any more responsible than she was for sleepiness, or headache, or arithmetical blunders in her accounts.

An honorable and high-minded woman was Janoca Phythian in all her private relations with Heaven; there was nothing mean or paltry in her composition; and while she held it as a prime rule of conduct to employ no vulgar precaution either to avert the wrath or to invite the favor *Superum*, her first and finest endeavor was to rid her soul of all religious sharp-practice, double-dealing, finesse, and pretence: hence the necessity for a truce of God arose but seldom—not that she attributed a nice particularity, a severe parsimony, a greedy rigor to the *Dii superii*, or failed to apply to the same quarter that saying of Mr. Burke: "*It is the nature of all greatness not to be exact;*" it was simply because she felt that she owed it to herself to be with immortals as with mortals—an honorable lady.

On the night of the flood it was one o'clock ere she wished her brother "good-night," and kissed him as was her wont. On the following night, the hands of the softly ticking clock on the library mantelpiece were creeping toward the midnight hour, yet Janoca only rose and gracefully touched the fire with

the poker, and then reseated herself, opposite her brother, in her low black-and-gold wicker-chair upholstered in old gold satin.

Balthasar had just finished his account of the meeting in front of the forge. It was easy to see that his narration had fallen upon no dull ears and no unsympathetic heart; for Janoca's sweet and noble face was radiant with animation, and her lovely dark eyes flashed and sparkled with amusement, and amazement, and delight. Balthasar leaned back in his arm-chair and smoked slowly, and, looking with proud affection at his sister, thought within himself that Jano was really the handsomest, and stateliest, and sweetest, and best woman in the county.

"Do you know him at all?" inquired Jano, referring to Kneebone.

"I never spoke to him before last night."

"What sort of a man is he? Is he very rough?"

"Not at all; indeed there's a certain polish about him; but it isn't thick enough to disguise his native manner and his real nature."

"He is not a vulgar man, then?"

"There's nothing vulgar about him."

"He had a good chance of showing his vulgarity, if he had any, to-night, I should think?"

"Yes, first-rate; but he didn't do it."

"He must be very rich? Just think of it!—why, the rescue will cost him three or four hundred pounds, to say nothing of the unique Memorial Hall!"

"I don't quite understand it at all. One thing is certain—he hasn't made his money at blacksmithing."

"Of course not. He is probably a man with a history. He has travelled far, and seen strange things. If his character is as good as his individuality seems to be distinct, he is no common man. He is worth knowing, brother."

"Well, suppose I introduce you to him?" suggested Balthasar, with an air of serious waggishness.

A smile crossed Janoca's face as she answered:

"I should not object. Your commonplace man is so multitudinous and vapid, that one is glad to taste the salt even of singularity. Besides, he deserves some recognition for our Ruth's sake. And what are you going to do for the young man who saved our dear girl's life?"

"The picturesque blacksmith?"

"Yes. We must do something handsome, brother. He risked his life for her, you know; and we must not let Mr. Kneebone shame us."

"You are right; the young man will doubtless expect some reward for his gallantry. They are cousins; though, of course, no sane man would jump into the spate to save the life of any cousin. His feeling was probably deeper and—and—deeper than that of cousinship. Yes; he deserves a reward, and—I dare say he will get it."

There was a strange dryness in her brother's speech and tone which Janoca did not quite understand. She gave him a quick, interrogatory glance ere she said:

"You would not put a less value on Ruth's life than the blacksmith—a stranger—does?"

"I hope not. I would have breasted the spate to save her at any rate. But do you know, Jano, I listened to Kneebone's talk very closely; and from what he said—or rather, perhaps from what he did not say—I couldn't help thinking that he thought a great deal more of Abel's rescue than of Ruth's. If he were a philosopher, of course I should not be surprised at his recognition of the superiority of the male life over the female. But——" He paused, for Jano seemed in a brown study. He smoked until she came out of it.

"Are you going to see this man, do you think, soon?"

Balthasar reflected a while.

"Yes, I ought to see him soon."

"What about?"

Balthasar had no desire to let Janoca know what was his business with Kneebone; but the events of last night had only made it the more necessary that steps should be taken to extricate both himself and Ruth from their false position.

"I thought—as he seems to be a man of ideas—to have a chat with him about—young Boden," said Balthasar, unblushingly.

"Yes, a very good idea, too—let him know we mean to mark our sense of gratitude to the brave young fellow. When shall you see him?"

"Perhaps to-morrow."

"Brother, I should like to have some talk with Mr. Christopher Kneebone about this Memorial Hall. Will you say as much to him, and ask him to come and see us?"

"With pleasure, Jano."

"Thank you, dear brother. Good-night."

She bent down and kissed her brother, and retired, leaving Balthasar to meditate upon the inconsequent and capricious ways of women.

The next day, after luncheon, Balthasar called at the miller's. He met the doctor, who, in answer to his inquiries, said:

"No, there is no danger. I was a little nervous yesterday, but it passed off. A few days' nursing, and she will be all right again. Oh, yes, yes; there is no reason why you shouldn't see her. Don't excite her, and don't let her talk much—then I think a short visit might do her good."

So Balthasar asked to see Ruth, and was shown upstairs by Jane; the miller was not in the house.

Ruth was clad in a pretty mauve dressing-gown, and lay on a couch near the window, in the sunshine. Her color came softly, and her eyes lighted up with pleasure, as Balthasar came forward and took her hand, saying:

"I am so glad to see you are pulling through so nicely and sensibly. Many a girl would have gone and had a fever, and a raving spell. Then you would have probably made another sensation by—by letting the cat out of the bag."

Ruth smiled as she answered:

"I believe it was the fear of doing what you say that kept me in my senses."

"Ha! well, my child, I hope there will be no necessity for us to imprison any cat or kit much longer. I should think the miller will recognize some one's claim, after what has happened?"

"He doesn't dream of it. And why should he?"

"What do you mean, Penelope?" asked Balthasar, struck with something in her tone.

"I have thought that Abel might have stood a good chance now with father if——" She paused.

"Do you really think so?" asked Balthasar earnestly.

"Yes; it is now or never, surely."

"Ha! then am I full of sorrow. Yet you will believe me, I know, when I say that I did it for the best. I thought only of you."

"O Mr. Phythian, forgive me! I didn't mean to be ungrateful; I didn't mean to—I wouldn't wound you for the world! If you hadn't done what you did I don't know what would have happened. But I——"

"Yes, I know. If we could only have foreseen the spate, and you in it, and Abel saving you, it would have altered our calculations. Do you know what I am going to do, so soon as you are well again? I am going to tell your father, without any delay, that I am no longer a suitor for your hand; that will be the private version. The public version will be that Miss Ruth Boden has declined—and very wisely, too—the attentions of a dry old stick named Balthasar Phythian. If your respected parent, Miss Penelope, had not been so loquacious,

there would have been no necessity for a public version at all. But, of course, the unexpected always happens. I fear the miller will talk strong English to me. But he will not be able to blame you, so I do not care a fig. There, you must not talk; the doctor says so. I am going now, and I expect Jano will be down again soon. Does she bore you?"

"Bore me! She is like an angel—a beautiful seraph," murmured Ruth.

Balthasar gave a low laugh, bent down and kissed Penelope upon the forehead, and left the room and the house.

He crossed the bridge and went up the hill till he reached the smithery. Kneebone was not there, and a new man—a smith engaged for the nonce—said he thought he was in the house; so Balthasar went on to Rook's Nest. The front door was open, affording Balthasar a view of the interior that would have greatly surprised him forty-eight hours earlier. As it was, he was struck with the simple elegance that seemed to characterize the place.

In answer to his knock, an elderly woman appeared, faultlessly neat in her apparel and perfectly trained in deportment. She informed Balthasar that the master was out, but she expected him back in a few minutes; that young Master Abel, who was mending finely, was upstairs lying down; and would the gentleman come inside and wait a few minutes? Or perhaps he would prefer to sit outside, "in the heptagarden"? She indicated what looked to be a pretty retreat at the side of the house, whither Balthasar betook himself.

He passed beneath the low-spreading branches of a fine yew, and entered a path that ran along the foot of a steep, sloping lawn of very modest dimensions. A carefully cut hedge of thorn, thickly intertwined with ivy, guarded the path and one of the sides, while the other two sides were protected by the end of the house and a high stone wall, at the foot of which was a long row of red-currant bushes. From the path, a septangular cutting had been made into the middle of the sloping lawn, the sides of which were beautifully curved and turfed, and the bottom was paved with large tiles of a bright crimson hue. Over this cutting, and supported by posts on either side, was a stout cross-bar which served a double purpose. Firstly, it supported a prettily striped awning for a tent; and secondly, it also supported a couple of those ingenious and supremely comfortable inventions known in the States as hammock-chairs. The retreat took its name from the cutting, which, in allusion to its shape, Kneebone, its maker, dubbed the heptagon, or, as Bridget tongued it, the heptagarden.

In a little while Kneebone came into the heptagon. Kneebone got his pipe, Balthasar lit a cigar, and, gently swinging side by side in the hammock-chairs, the two men reclined at a comfortable angle and had a long talk together. Kneebone agreed with Balthasar that the time had come for him to drop the character of "The Dummy Lover," as Balthasar styled himself.

"Old Nathan Wass doesn't believe in Abel having anything to do with his cousin," remarked Balthasar.

"Indeed! How's that?" inquired Kneebone.

"The feud, you know, between the two brothers. Nathan thinks that old Abel, as he calls him, would strongly object. But I don't know about that. And then, I am thinking the shepherd is probably dead by this time."

"Yes," said Kneebone, with a light laugh, "the shepherd is probably dead. As to what he would think of his lad wedding Ruth Boden, it's hard to say. If old Abel was pig-headed, or mulish, or a nurser of wrath, he would probably object; but report and tradition don't paint him like that. At least I never heard they did. Have you?"

"He was, I believe, one of the gentlest-natured men that ever lived," answered Balthasar.

"You don't say! Was he quite soft, then?"

"I think his son will answer for him. They say that when he got roused he was worse than a mad bull."

"Isn't it odd how his memory lives on among the natives?"

"It will be almost as fresh in Voe a hundred years to come as it is to-day. We cannot raise a tragedy here every other day, you know; though we came pretty near having one the other night. That reminds me: my sister, who keeps house for me, is much interested in your Memorial Hall project. She laid upon me the pleasant charge, Mr. Kneebone, of inviting you to come up to the Chase and talk it over with her. You will pardon me, but I think you are fortunate in securing her sympathy beforehand. She is chary of giving her sympathy, but with it goes an intelligence that reflects on her brother—well, disastrously."

"I have already heard more than once of Miss Phythian. I shall be right down pleased if she will only feather my arrow. I am just in want of a woman with ideas; she will be worth half a dozen smart men. Yes, indeed, I'll come with pleasure. When shall it be?"

"Would to-morrow evening suit you?"

"Perfectly."

"Then that is settled. There is another matter I should like

to mention to you. I presume you do not know that my sister, Jano, is ignorant of my true relation to Penelope—I mean, Miss Boden?”

“Does she think you are really in love with Ruth Boden?” asked Kneebone, in a tone of astonishment.

“I dare not say what she thinks as to the quality of the sentiment I am supposed to feel; but as regards the supposed fact of our informal engagement, she has not the smallest suspicion but what it is real and actual.”

At this Kneebone laughed heartily, while Balthasar stared at him as if curious of his amusement.

“You see,” continued Balthasar, in a tone of confidential frankness, “it is a matter of property. It is a wretched nuisance, but one of us must marry and have a child, otherwise the property goes where Jano wouldn’t have it go for anything. She would marry herself rather than that should happen.”

“Why doesn’t she, may I ask?”

“Because the right man has not turned up. He never will. He does not exist. But I believe she thinks he does. I tell her she is like the Mexican Indians, who look for the coming of the divine white man with a long beard and a longer name.”

“You mean Quetzalcoatl?”

“Quetzalcoatl—yes, that is the name. Is he a friend of yours? Not a relative, I hope?”

Kneebone laughed and said:

“That legend is one of the few bits of poetry that cling to the Mexican Indians. I’ve heard them tell it many a time, and it seemed prettier and sweeter every time. If a man should be made in the likeness of the Toltec god of the air—wise, gentle-hearted Quetzalcoatl, who stopped his ears at the sound of war—happen Miss Janoca Phythian might travel far and fare worse if she said him nay.”

“I only wish he would show himself! Even if he bore the name of his great prototype, I would call him Brother Quetzalcoatl with pleasure. Meanwhile, I have to explain matters to Jano as best I can. Believe me, I would almost as soon get married! I was wondering if I had not better let it out to-morrow, when you are there? Will you back me; put in a word when I’m dry; suggest an argument when I’m empty?”

“You may rely on me to do my best, sir. Two men ought to be able to tackle and subdue one woman,” said Kneebone, laughing.

“Thank you, thank you. You are my Popocatepetl.”

“You mean—Quetzalcoatl?”

"Ha! yes. The one's a mountain and the other's a——"

"A myth."

"Maybe not, maybe not, Mr. Kneebone."

"Maybe not, maybe not," murmured Christopher Kneebone to himself, half an hour after Balthasar had wished him good-night.

CHAPTER XXV

JOB ELSE & CO.

"I'm afraid I've got a sort of elephant on my hands. And yet no, I won't say that either. It is more like a young baby; all it wants to make it grow up healthy and handsome is good nursing and training. It needs a—a mother to look after it, nothing more or less."

"I think you are right, Mr. Kneebone. Many similar attempts, that ought to be a success, prove a failure exactly, I think, because they lack the womanly element. But it is going to cost you a great deal, not only of money, but of time and energy and patience."

"I know it, Miss Phythian; and the worst of it is, I am one of those fellows who don't work well by themselves. I once owned a mule that wouldn't do a day's work in a month by himself; but put him in a span and he would pull till he dropped. I am like that mule. Now, if I could only get somebody to take an interest in the thing, and work with me, I'm thinking we could make a success of it."

"Have you tried my brother? He is——"

"No, Jano, he is not, begging your pardon. He is angling for a fish, and you offer a stone," quoth Balthasar.

"I am hoping to secure Mr. Phythian's help, but, like me, he is of the wrong sex. If I were to advertise, I should say: Wanted a woman with ideas, brimful of intelligence and energy and sympathy, a perfect piece of grace and sweetness and melody, to put a living soul of beautiful refinement and sense into an inanimate organization."

"Then why don't you advertise?"

"I have done, as well as I could, Miss Phythian."

"Indeed! Where?"

"Oh, in the only quarter where I thought there would be any chance of its finding a proper billet."

"In the *Times*?"

Yes, there was a sweet smile still on her face as she spoke; but did his ears deceive him? Or was there really a delicate and subtle change in her tone, a faint note of coldness and

wounded pride, like the sudden breath of a glacier over a garden of roses?

"No, madam, not in the *Times*. In the—library at Carbel Chase!"

The force of the remark lay in the fact that the speaker was at that moment sitting in the library at Carbel Chase, for the first time in his life. He had been there nearly two hours, and the time had gone quickly; he was smoking his second cigar, and so was Balthasar, who had gradually withdrawn himself from an active share in the conversation, so soon as he discovered that Janoca's interest in their visitor was sustained. As for Janoca, she was in one of her best, if not her most brilliant, moods; when brilliant she was apt to dazzle and bewilder and overpower, and sometimes provoke. To-night she was sympathetic, plastic, forgot to be epigrammatic, was innocent of satire, was beautifully receptive, and magically soft and graceful and captivating.

Kneebone thought she was the supreme embodiment of fascinating womanhood. She wore a silver-gray dress of silk, with a long train; a mass of rich old lace was about her neck and bosom, and her only ornament was a brooch in her bosom, formed of a group of diamonds that flashed with every movement of her body. To Kneebone she was like a glorious wine, delicious, exhilarating, intoxicating; from her he drank gladness, merriment, ideas, courage, and took that secret root of all good manners and fine breeding—self-possession. So that Kneebone also was at his best, and Janoca said to herself, "I was right. He is a man worth knowing."

We are always pleased to be able to verify our provisional judgments, if only to let our friends know that our prevoyant faculty is not contemptible. Janoca found the Blacksmith of Voe to be anything but a Jack Wragg. The first thing that struck her was his personal appearance—and Janoca had a contempt for those people who affected to make no count of personal appearance, for she held with gentle Spenser that

"Soul is Form, and doth the body make."

Originally Kneebone must have had a very comely countenance, before the accident to his nose occurred and the scar under his left eye was made; but, though these defects marred his good looks, they did not interfere with his good look. He looked well; his beard was really handsome, his eyes were intelligent and winsome, he had a good head and brow, and the full expression of his face was remarkably pleasant; there was in it agreeable suggestions of experience, of strength, of shrewd-

ness, of good-nature and kindly humor. His figure was good, and he carried himself with unostentatious dignity. His dress was simply blue serge, but Janoca noted that his clothes were well cut and well fitted and—well worn. His linen was fine, and exquisitely laundered. His manners were good, and so was his manner; he seemed perfectly easy, and as far from awkwardness as from affectation. He did not look, nor was he, a gentleman; but he did look what in truth he was—a gentleman-like, well-to-do, self-made and far-travelled man of the world.

Janoca liked his quiet, unruffled self-possession, his mild satire, his genial humor, his speckled philosophy of life, sometimes cynical to the ear and the ear only, and sometimes quaint, and always with a golden vein of hard sense running through it. There was a rhythm in his ideas which Janoca relished; they all seemed steeped in the self-same music of sentiment, and thereby announced their oneness of brood. Janoca concluded therefrom that the quickest way from Christopher Kneebone's brain to his tongue was through his heart.

No, his ears had not deceived him. It mattered not the least bit in the world what the village blacksmith might think of the natural and acquired gifts and graces of the mistress of Carbel Chase. Of course not. And yet, singular to relate, when Janoca Phythian had made the sweet inference that Christopher Kneebone did not think that the Perfect Piece, etc., etc., was within range of his voice and eye and ear—that same instant she was conscious of a little shiver, and of a quick mental retirement, while in her mind's eye was the image of a garden of roses smitten suddenly by the breath of a glacier! Then, like a fierce gust from a hot garden of sweet spices, came his words: "No, madam, not in the *Times*. In the—library at Carbel Chase!"

It was exceedingly foolish, she knew, but she could not help it—she felt the blood burning her face. She threw a quick glance at her brother, but it was too late to catch sight of the singular spasmodic play of the facial muscles that for a moment agitated Balthasar, before he closed his eyes, and robbed his face of every trace of emotion; but Kneebone saw it, and was not a little amused.

Janoca lowered her stately head to hide her inopportune blushes, hoping that Kneebone would continue the conversation. But the cruel man only sat perfectly still, with his lovable soft gray eyes fixed upon her, and wondering to himself, as many another man has wondered, wherein lay the undeniable beauty of a blush? The color died away, and Janoca raised her head and looked at Kneebone.

"Do you think that I could really help you?" she asked, with a winsome smile.

"If you only would, I'd let you have your own way in everything—do what you like, spend what you like. Why, if I had the making of the woman I want, in order to make the Memorial Hall a success, I should take Miss Phythian as my model," said Kneebone, with nothing of boldness or gallantry in his manner—nothing but a quiet, straightforward statement of opinion.

Unconventional in its directness, questionless it was; but not the least pleasant characteristic of Christopher Kneebone, to the thinking of Janoca Phythian, was the frequent and unexpected cropping out of the unconventional in him. Janoca bowed graciously in acknowledgment of his sentiment, and said:

"Then I will do my best to assist you." A little later she said: "You take a great interest in your young blacksmith; do you think he is worthy of it?"

Kneebone laughed.

"I don't know. The chances are that, in strict justice, he is not. But I am no stickler for the principle of mere merit; I look upon it as one of the modern fads. It is popular, of course; that is where the irony comes in. Fancy a *crowd* favoring the principle of merit! It is nothing less than moral suicide. So I was not troubled on the score of Abel's merit—I always call him Abel. Kissing goes by favor; when it does not, the pleasure of kissing will be dead."

"Hear, hear!" chimed Balthasar, without opening his eyes.

"But people will hardly see it in that light. Why, if you were his father you could hardly do more," said Janoca.

Kneebone only laughed, and said:

"I shouldn't mind having such a son."

Janoca drew from her pocket a small card, and looked at it attentively for some moments; then she looked keenly at Kneebone, and then again at the card. This surprised Kneebone, and he said:

"Well, what have you got there, may I ask?"

Janoca uttered a melodious laugh as she fixed her dark eyes on his, and answered:

"Do you know, Mr. Kneebone, you are very like what that young man's father would have been by now, if you had not—met with an accident!"

At this the blood came surging into Kneebone's face.

"I—I don't quite understand you," he stammered, awkward for the first time.

"Well, your forehead is the same; and from what I can see

of your mouth, that is the same; and the eyes—yes, the eyes are the very same. You know the eyes seldom change. Look for yourself.”

She leaned forward and passed the photograph, for such it was, to Kneebone. For a moment or two he gazed at it in utter bewilderment. Then he turned it round. On the back was written: *To Alice Duckmanton, from A. B.*

“It’s the very one—I—”

“Gave to Ruth Boden’s mother. Ah! I thought I was right. You are Abel Boden, the long-lost shepherd.”

“Jano! Jano! Are you mad? What’s that you say? My good sir, don’t mind what she says. It’s Jano’s way. Why, bless me! you look as if you were—were—as mad as Jano herself. You aren’t really, are you?”

“I am, though.”

“What! mad?”

“Oh, no, not that. I am Abel Boden, the long-lost shepherd!”

Said Balthasar solemnly: “Jano, I know not how long you have practised the unhallowed art of witchcraft, but you are evidently expert in it; though I have seen no black cat and no broomstick about. Tell me truly, is this the brother of Luke Boden, the miller?”

Answered Janoca, with like solemnity:

“Brother, my only witchcraft is my woman’s wit. You have heard him. He is Luke Boden’s brother Abel.”

At this Balthasar rose to his feet, as did Kneebone, who wondered what would happen next. For some time the two men stood eye to eye in perfect silence. At length Balthasar broke the curious stillness with:

“Abel Boden, a few days ago Nathan Wass told me what happened at the quarry years ago, and what happened afterward. And I want to tell you my opinion of you.”

He paused a moment as Janoca rose and came to his side, and, with a pale face, laid her hand upon his arm. Kneebone’s face was set and resolute, and wore a slight frown. No one spoke, and Balthasar continued:

“My opinion of you is that you are a downright——” (a little involuntary gasp escaped Janoca)—“a downright NOBLE FELLOW! Give me your hand, sir!”

“O you foolish creature!” murmured Jano, moving away to the far end of the room—not that the curtains needed rearranging, but that she found it convenient to rearrange them.

“I thought you were going to bully me, sure enough,” laughed Kneebone, as he gave to Balthasar the hand-grip of a

lifelong friendship. There followed a long talk, in which Janoca manifested no little interest, as Kneebone told the history of his life and adventures during the past twenty years. It was a strange, stirring tale, with episodes romantic and thrilling, and Janoca found herself to her astonishment burning, tingling, and shivering at a story of real life.

"And the best of it is, I am actually back again in dear old Voe, and have found my lad all right; and though I went away a shepherd and came back a blacksmith, I am neither one nor the other. I don't like bragging, though it's a very useful art when it is used artistically; other things being equal, the man that can brag the neatest will win the day—that is the conclusion I have come to after considerable observation of life. Not many honest men can boast three sets of names; I can, and I'm not ashamed to sail under any one of them. Two of them, Boden and Kneebone, you know; shepherd and blacksmith; they belong only to Voe, and no one knows them outside of Voe. My third name is of no account at Voe; but at San Francisco, and Monte Video, and Melbourne, it's known pretty well. Ask anybody who is Job Else & Company, and they will tell you."

"Job Else & Company," repeated Balthasar, "why, that is the big wool man. I fancy he is known of even in Voe. Are you connected with him?"

"Well, rather. Job Else & Company consist of one person, Job himself. His name, however, really is—do you think you could guess it?"

Balthasar shook his head, saying:

"Not the slightest idea in the world. All I know of him is—he is a wool king."

"Couldn't *you* guess it?" asked Kneebone, turning to Janoca.

"I think I could. Job Else & Company is—Abel Boden!"

"What! No! Never! Why, Else is a millionaire, man! Come, I say, Kneebone; you said you were going to brag, but——"

"You draw the line at 'there's millions in it,' eh? But you know, a man may be a millionaire in the States four times over, and yet be no millionaire in England; that is the difference between dollar and pound. All I say is, I have money enough for me and my lad; and as for Job Else & Company, if I'm not that respectable firm, I don't know who is."

"Why, really, Mr. Kneebone," laughed Janoca—"I beg pardon—Mr. Boden—no—Messrs. Job Else & Company, you will force me to revive my never quite extinct faith in fairies. You are Prince Fortunatus himself."

"Yes; I won't say but what I have been strangely lucky—I believe in luck, though many people don't. But one is never quite satisfied; there is always something lacking," said Kneebone, with a sigh.

"You are thinking of your brother?"

"No, Miss Phythian, not at all. But now you remind me of him—don't you think he makes a good stiff thorn in the flesh? Think how he has treated my lad—my lad who risked his life to save *his* daughter!"

"Yes; it is very cruel and sad. But you know, of course, that my brother is going to marry your niece, Ruth. And when the miller has really become one of the Phythian family, as it were, I am going to take him in hand. In our family we do not allow feuds like that."

"Unless they happen to be—cousins—and are christened Philip—and they are heirs-presumptive—and we exceedingly detest them," supplemented Balthasar, laconically.

Before Janoca could reply, Kneebone interposed with:

"It would be a very great honor for us Bodens to marry into the Phythian family, and nothing could give me greater pleasure than to see it brought about. But, in this case, I'm mightily afraid we are counting our chickens before they are hatched."

"But they are really en—— Well, no, perhaps not formally engaged, but they understand each other. And the miller has consented. Is it not so, brother?"

"Yes; I think Penelope and I understand each other. But Messrs. Else & Company is right. I find there is a prior claim upon her affections—a claim that cannot very well be ignored now."

"O brother, brother, you ought to have been a—a clergyman! Give me the text, please. I do not want the sermon yet."

"I beg to refer you to Messrs. Else & Company. It is a highly respectable and well-informed firm."

"The fact of the matter is, Miss Phythian, the lassie loves my lad, Abel. Happen—I give it as a mere suggestion—happen she didn't know her heart so well before the flood as since. I don't know how things will turn out yet—the miller is shaping badly, to my thinking; but if it could come about, maybe it would be the bridge over the great gulf."

"Yes, yes, I can see that; but oh, I am so sorry! so sorry!" said Janoca, softly. She sat for some time lost in thought, then she said to her brother, almost pathetically: "Have I got to go through it all again for you?"

"No, Jano, I wouldn't, if I were you. I think I am entitled to a rest. It's your innings now, you know," answered Balthasar.

CHAPTER XXVI

UNCLE AND NEPHEW

It was getting on toward the end of May, nearly a month after the flood, when, one fine summer's evening, Ruth being out of doors somewhere, the miller went into the painfully genteel parlor, for about the first time since the day when Balthasar had turned the key on him. He had no special reason for entering that particular room on that particular evening, or for doing what he proceeded to do; in all of which he was but the blind and passive tool and medium of that grotesque, impish, and malicious element of mischief that lurks in life disguised as chance and accident, and delights in reducing our carefully imposed forms to pi.

If it be true, as hath been said, that attached to Jupiter's great toe by a light chain are many minor gods of exceeding great nimbleness and subtility, known among the immortal big-wigs as second causes, and among mortals as accidents or events—then it is probable that the miller was being unconsciously led by the ear by one of these inferior deities of sly, ironic, and pitiless turn of mind. In which case, the sub-celestial gentleman, despite his connection with Jupiter's great toe, would have got no more than his deserts had he been treated as a common, every-day English ghost, and, by the aid of bell, book, and candle, been laid forever in the deepest trout-hole the Scarthin could boast.

The miller stood in the middle of the room, and looked about him with a frowning, interrogatory glance, as though mentally demanding of each piece of furniture what was its business there. He looked restless, ill-tempered, and unhappy; ready to pick a quarrel with the most polished of centre-tables, or with the softest and easiest-natured arm-chair in the parish. Nor was this a transient mood or passing wave of anger; on the contrary, it was twelve days old, and its strength was still waxing. A consciousness of its existence had projected itself all over Voe, and folk found themselves gazing in the direction of the tree-embosomed mill, with the same odd sensation they would have experienced had they

known there was a rumbling volcano in the pines, that might any moment shoot out its red tongue.

It has never been recorded that any one ever sympathized with a volcano, active or passive. And somehow the miller was keenly conscious that his friends and neighbors had unanimously voted him a volcano. The opinion stung him less than its falsity. Had it only been true, he might have tasted the honey-sweetness of revenge, by blackening the sky with smoke and reddening earth with fire. Even in a blast-furnace, there were certain grim potentialities; but in a blacksmith's forge, only the childish imagination could discover the elements of the terrific.

Whatever his friends and neighbors might think of him, the miller's private and personal knowledge hurried him and harried him down the steep and bottomless slopes that lay between the burning cone of the mountain and the wind-blown fire of the village forge. Yet fire is fire, whether handled by God Vulcan or by Jack Wragg; and for setting a town in flames a lucifer-match is practically as good as the best sample of forked lightning. The miller certainly was on fire. His heart burned within him, and so did his spleen, and so did his brains, and so did his nether lip; indeed it seemed as if every separate piece of his anatomy, physical and spiritual, had caught fire.

The blow, sudden, sharp, unexpected, which had struck out the latent flame within him, was Balthasar Phythian's retreat from his supposed engagement to marry Ruth Boden. It had come upon him like a bolt from a clear sky; he had listened to Balthasar's statements, his explanations, his apologies, his protestations, his regrets, like one a-dreaming. He had said nothing but Yes and No; he had even accompanied Balthasar to the head of the lane, and—incredible as it now seemed to him—he had actually shaken hands with him at parting! It was like the deadly fascination of the serpent. Balthasar himself had noticed it, thanked his stars for it, profited by it, inwardly prayed that it might last until he had left the mill half a mile behind him; and all the time had odd and jumbled images in his mind's eye of Belshazzar, in a darkened banquet-hall, staring at some phosphorescent writing on the wall; of Zacharias in the temple, looking round to see what had become of his power of speech; of Balaam descending from his talking ass, and standing off from him, with mixed feelings of disgust and admiration.

The following day had found the miller at Carbel Chase all on fire. Balthasar, foreseeing the visit, had gone to Yewdle

Brig, and left it all to unsuspecting Jano. Janoca received the miller, and did her best to mollify him, but all to no purpose. He grew mad with rage and fury, threatened the direst vengeance upon Balthasar, and began to let loose strange oaths. Then Janoca assumed her stateliest manner, her most freezing *hauteur*, and her bitterest and most contemptuous irony. It was majesty against vulgarity, a hedge-stick against a glittering rapier. She beat him down, she disarmed him, she cowed him, she made him feel ridiculous, contemptible, depraved, and she finally dismissed him as she would an insolent beggar.

But once out of her presence, the fire within him broke out again with redoubled fury. He would bring an action for breach of promise, and claim ten thousand pounds damages, and all the world should know how "Gentleman" Phythian supported his designation. He told Ruth what he was going to do in her name, and on her behalf. Then, lo and behold! another strange and monstrous and utterly unexpected thing came to pass—Ruth absolutely refused to allow him to do anything of the kind in her name, and said, with the air of a tragedy queen, that wild horses should not draw her to appear in court in any such suit! As she thus spoke, to the miller's thinking she was a second Janoca Phythian, only on a smaller scale. There were the same coolness, the same exquisite self-possession, the same pride, and an awful hint of the same scorn. Whereat the miller's joints were loosened, and his courage began to ooze, and he concluded it was better to avoid defeat by shunning conflict. And so the days had worn away, and, feeling helpless and baffled, his rage had fallen back upon itself, and was burning white-hot within him.

Presently as he stood in the middle of the parlor, his glance fell upon an old ivory-mounted work-box, that had formerly belonged to his wife while yet she was Alice Duckmanton. He opened the box, and, after some little fumbling in the bottom, brought out a small key which belonged to an antique escritoire, of mahogany, that stood in one corner of the room. In this curious combination of writing-desk, pigeon-holes, drawers, and secret compartments, the miller had always stored his private papers and valuable documents, together with various small articles on which he had put a price of affection.

No one was supposed to know where the key was kept save the miller himself, although, as a matter of fact, it was within his knowledge that Ruth knew, and also Violet Chalk, and he would not have been surprised to learn that Jane, the comparatively new importation, was as wise as the rest. At the same time, he had every reason to believe that the knowledge was

abused by no one; his will in the matter was clearly known, and was scrupulously respected. Only once or twice in her life had Ruth enjoyed the fearful delight of peeping into the drawers of what had always been to her a mysterious piece of furniture.

The miller drew a chair in front of the *escritoire*, and having opened it out, sat down and began to go through the contents of drawer after drawer, solely on account of the old memories and distinctly pleasant sensations that were awakened by a bit of faded writing, a silk lace, a small piece of old-time jewelry, or a lock of golden hair. These trifles were not carefully folded up, labelled, and collected together in a separate compartment, as they would have been in the hands of a sentimentalist; they were scattered here and there, as though they had been left where they had been first dropped, intermixed with documents impervious to sentiment. None of these serious and legal papers claimed any attention from the miller: with a beautiful instinct—as true as it was useless—he made as though they were not, and devoted himself to the knick-knacks that were touched with passion and sentiment.

He came at length to a little cedar box, tied with white ribbon; he held it in his hand for a moment or two, and then put it back into the drawer, as though he had concluded not to open it. But all at once he changed his mind, took out the box again, and opened it. It contained only eight or nine portraits, two or three being antiques painted on ivory, a couple of silhouettes, and the remainder photographs. Suddenly the miller uttered an exclamation, and rose from his seat and went out of the room, calling "Ruth, Ruth!" In a little while the miller returned, accompanied by Ruth, who looked pale and nervous.

"Somebody's been in there and taken a photograph. Do you know anything of it?" said the miller angrily, pointing to the open *escritoire*.

"What one is it, father?" inquired Ruth, the color rushing to her face.

"What does it matter to you whose it is? It's a photograph of—of a man, and it belonged to your mother. Speak! do you know anything of it?" cried the miller almost fiercely.

Ruth looked at the desk, wondering what evil destiny had led her father there that evening; not twice a year did he go near it. Then she looked at her father and felt frightened; he looked so angry and she knew she had done wrong. He laid his hand upon her shoulder roughly, saying:

"Do you hear; do you know anything of it? Yes or no?"

"Yes, father, I do. It is quite safe. Oh, do forgive me! I never disobeyed you before, father."

"Where is it?" thundered the miller.

"I lent it to—to Miss Phythian."

"What's that? What's that you say, you hussy?" cried the miller, hoarse with fury.

"O father, please don't! She said she would take every care of it, and let me have it back safely. I will go to-morrow and get it. I'm so sorry—oh, I'm so sorry!" faltered Ruth.

But the miller seized her by both shoulders, and, glaring at her like a wild beast, exclaimed:

"Good God! if you were only a boy I'd half kill you! Why did you give it to her?"

"She wanted to know if we had a likeness of your bro——"

The miller thrust his hand before Ruth's mouth, crying:

"Stop it! How did you know whose likeness it was?"

"I saw it some years ago, and knew mother's writing on the back, and somehow I guessed it was—his, though I wasn't quite sure."

"And what did that—that Jezebel want with it?"

"I don't know, father."

"You lie, you miserable traitoress! you lie!"

"Father, I do not lie. I have told you the truth; I don't know what she wanted with it."

"You're a brazen-faced thief and liar, I tell you," roared the miller with a fearful oath, purple with fury.

At this, Ruth the trembling, the timid, the penitent, the conscience-stricken, recoiled with a shudder, and cried: "Oh, oh, oh!" as though she were stabbed. Then, like magic, there came over her a wondrous change; she drew herself up to her full height, and on her face came a strange look of dignified womanhood, and her eyes grew fearless and curiously bright. She said not a word, but looked at her father steadily. Eye to eye they wrestled for mastery. Daughter against father, and father against daughter, it was will to will—a strife of souls—the darkest strife in the universe. And the new-born woman won.

Suddenly her father dropped his eyes—beaten. Not a word was said; the one knew he had lost, as the other knew she had won. The miller raised his arm and pointed Ruth silently to the door. And Ruth obeyed, and went up to her chamber and shut to the door, and there and then laid aside the panoply of her womanhood, and subsided into the poor, unhappy child, motherless and miserable, whose heart was well-nigh broken.

An hour later, Jane came into the parlor with a lighted lamp in her hand, and said:

"If you please, sir, Mr. Boden the blacksmith wants to see you."

The miller looked up quickly, gave an odd laugh, and answered:

"Well, show Mr. Boden the blacksmith in."

As Abel entered the room, the miller rose and remained standing.

"Good-evening, uncle," said Abel, coming forward and extending his hand.

But the miller kept his hand in his trousers-pocket, and, with a brisk nod, said:

"Good-evening—blacksmith."

Abel had counted on just such a reception, and yet the real thing somewhat staggered him. He toyed nervously with his exquisite mustache, and seemed at a loss what to say next, while the miller stood like a frowning rock in front of him. Said Abel, at length:

"May I have a few minutes' talk with you?"

"You may, or I shouldn't have let you in here."

"It's about your daughter, Ruth."

"And what have you to do with my daughter?"

"I saved her life, as far as that goes, not so long ago. But I don't——"

"You have come for a reward, eh? Well, how much do you want? Will a five-pound note satisfy you?"

"No, it won't. I risked my life to save hers, and I value my life at more than five pounds. When I look for a money payment, I'll have my money's worth, or nothing at all. But I'm not here on any such errand."

"Then what the deuce do you lug in my girl's name for? Come—the fewer words we have together and the quicker we part, the better."

"I want to ask your consent to our coming together."

"What's that? Just say it over again, please."

"I love her, uncle, with all my heart, and I think she cares for me a bit, and I——"

"I see. You want to court my girl Ruth. You think Gentleman Phythian's leavings about good enough for yourself. And the poor jilted mammet cares for the blacksmith now, does she?"

"Uncle, let bygones be bygones. I will make her a good husband, and I am your own brother's child."

"You damned idiot! Marry you? I'd rather see her dead

first. Get out of my sight, or I'll—I'll—damn you, I'll kick you out!" And the miller, with face convulsed with fury, and his eyes ablaze, advanced toward Abel with clenched fist.

Abel, utterly taken by surprise at this fearful outburst of passion, fell back a step or two; then he halted, and his handsome, dark-skinned face became flushed. There was an intense quiver in his voice as he said, with a great effort of self-repression:

"You are my father's brother and Ruth's father, and so—well, if you were any other man, I would ram your miserable oaths down your throat. I never injured you, never abused you behind your back. I am your own nephew. I am an honest man. I am as good a workman as you will find within a day's walk of Voe. I am fit to be the husband of your daughter any day. And if she is of my way of thinking I will marry her yet, or my name isn't Abel Boden." And he marched out of the house with the dignified swagger of a professional man of war. He was the true son of his father—the mild man fierce in wrath.

CHAPTER XXVII

KNEEBONE ON FIGHTING

CONSIDERING the amount of wrong-doing that goes on, there is every reason to believe that the world would be a very miserable place but for the existence and good offices of conscience. It is notorious, for instance, that the criminal classes are indebted to the soothing voice of an easy-going conscience for their immunity from the griping pangs of self-reproach. Again, it was the soft anodyne of a clear conscience, void of offence toward God and man, that preserved the priestly inquisitor from a horrid attack of nightmare, after he had seen his victim burnt alive at the stake, or heard his muscles snap on the rack. It pleases us to think that when any of our acquaintance forget to act on the square, or fall into the quagmires of meanness, spitefulness, uncharitableness, or of any other hereditary failing, though they brave it in public, in private they are honeycombed, as it were, with the gnawings of the worm of conscience. Though, for ourselves, conscience has been our steady friend and backer, and being well posted in the ins and outs of sundry critical passages in our life, it never failed to give us an approving pat on the back, however much outsiders, misinformed, jealous, and one-sided, may have censured us. "Gentlemen, let us clear our minds of cant," which is a great saying, and applies to divers subjects other than that of bounties on sugar.

The fact seems to be that conscience only rarely backs down on a man. And among the awful possibilities of life, such as murder, madness, leprosy, and hydrophobia, is to be reckoned this—that some day or other our conscience might actually back down upon us. This catastrophic event had happened to the miller. For the first time in his life he felt the gnawing of the famous metaphysical worm. It wrought in him a sincere and profound sorrow—sorrow that the little beast gnawed so viciously. And he solemnly vowed that he would turn over a new leaf, and—give the little beast something to gnaw for. He was very miserable. For in the popular legend of conscience so much is gospel—to wit, that when conscience does

once bite, it eats away the secret and precious root of a man's happiness.

The miller felt that his conduct toward young Abel was not exactly generous, or magnanimous, or noble; and it made him positively unhappy to think that he could not persuade himself that it was. In this predicament the saying occurred to him that what kills cures. The complexion of the idea was eminently favorable to him, as its application was obvious: if he held on his course, by and by his debilitated conscience would regain strength and tone, and he would be able to congratulate himself on having nobly done his duty, through the medium of revenge and hate. So the miller held on his course.

It took him several days to decide what he should say to Ruth, for at bottom he was afraid to bring about a collision between her regard for Abel and her obedience to her father. And this, not simply because he felt sure that she would follow her heart's argument whithersoever it blew, but also because he loved her with a fierce and jealous love. She was the only living thing he did love; and in her strong love and precious sympathy he found the only reed that was not rotten, upon which he could securely lean. And she had never failed him, though he had habitually withheld from her every token of tenderness, and every hint of the almost pathetic greediness with which he fed upon her affection. Ruth herself had no sense of being loved. For love she was a-hungered and athirst for years, until what time Abel had fed her with the divine food. On her duty to her father she put no mean construction. Nor was she the girl to hold cheaply her woman's love for the man who had first fed her heart with the bread of angels.

In his perplexity the miller sent for Violet Chalk, with whom he had a long talk about Ruth and Abel. Violet Chalk set forth that any woman worthy of the name was apt to find the voice of the charmer sweet, under like circumstances; she had even some grounds for thinking that a previous liking had ripened into a warm affection, since the events on the day of the spate: for her part, she saw plainly the finger of Providence in it, and a very strong and beautiful finger it was; and if she were Miss Ruth, she would follow it through thick and thin, and none the less willingly because it led straight into the arms of a fine young husband such as Abel Boden would make. Whereupon the miller waxed exceeding wroth, and began to use "language" at which Mistress Violet Chalk bounced out of his presence, declaring in a stage whisper, as she tossed her disdainful head, that she knew somebody whom no finger of Providence should ever have got her to marry, no, not if he had

been dropped out of the clouds to her on a lonely desert island! At length the miller called Ruth into the parlor one evening, and told her very briefly of Abel's visit.

"What did you say to him, father?" inquired Ruth, coloring, but curiously self-possessed.

"Said? I told him I would rather see you dead first."

The color fled from the girl's face.

"But, father——"

"Stop it. The less said the soonest mended. You can go now." And not another word was said.

It struck the miller that he had managed the thing very neatly. If Ruth was prepared to obey him, he had said all that was necessary to let her know his mind on the subject; and if, on the other hand, she was not prepared to obey him, he had spoken no words that might choke him in the event of his having, at a future time, to eat them.

Some time previous, and soon after the talk which he had heard when a prisoner in the parlor, the miller had given Am Ende a secret commission to execute. So far, there had been no necessity for him to inquire as to its execution, and he had been quite willing to let the subject lie, seeing that the Balthasar affair seemed to be running so smoothly. Now, however, his mind reverted to Am Ende with a strong throb of dark pleasure. Am Ende was only a tool, but a tool is a very valuable instrument when a piece of work has to be done, provided it be of the right kind. The miller asked no better tool for the work in hand than the one he had. Said the miller, one afternoon when they were alone in the mill:

"I told you some time ago to keep your eye on somebody. Happen, as usual, you've forgotten all about it."

"Oh, no, I hanna. I've bin agate o' telling you a few words more nor once. And then I thought as happen it 'ud be time enow to talk when you gev the word," answered Am Ende, with the air of a man accustomed to act only upon principles at once distinct and lofty.

"Well, what have you learned?"

"Not o'ermuch, but summat very well worth knowing. And that is, that the fellow that hopes to outwit a certain gentleman who bears a name he dunno deserve, had better begin a-cutting his wisdom-teeth three months afore he's born."

"Indeed! that's all, is it? I knew before to-day that it takes no great wit to outrun a fool," snorted the miller.

"Which is a nice smart cap enow, only it dunno fit this skull," retorted Am Ende, tapping his own headpiece. "He hanna outwitted me yet. But—well, young A. B.—not to speak

no names—he's considered not only the ant, but the fox as well and the trout and every blessed thing of guile in natur. They are sweet on one another, dead sure, miller."

"Do you mean the young folk or rats, idiot?" roared the miller.

"Oh, not the rats," laughed Am Ende, who proceeded to furnish his listener with an account of several meetings between Ruth and Abel.

The miller sat on a sack of flour, silent and savage, until Am Ende had talked himself dry, when he said:

"I see you have not been asleep, nor letting the grass grow under your feet, and I'll remember me of the same when we settle up. Let me have a report every week. Keep your eye on the man. Let nothing slip you. Gad! if we could only catch him tripping!"

A short, fierce laugh broke from him as he spoke. Am Ende also laughed a similar laugh, short and fierce. It was the laughter of deadly hate; and nothing on earth is stranger and more singular, nothing more peculiarly human and yet characteristically satanic, than the laughter of hate. The growling thunder of an earthquake is seraphic melody in comparison.

Am Ende obeyed his instructions, and kept his eye on Abel. There was no mistaking Abel's mood, and all Voe knew from his bearing that something had occurred to put him on his mettle. Self-contained he was as ever, separate and silent; but the strange and fascinating air of melancholy that had always surrounded and marked him out from his fellows, appeared to have given place to an air of challenge and defiance. Even his bodily carriage underwent a similar change; he walked more erect, trod the earth with a firmer step, held his chin up, and kept his eyes off the ground. The old folk, thinking of his father, said one to another: "He's th' son of his fader. That's owd Abel to th' life when he was angert."

Kneebone noted the change, sighed to himself, but said nothing. Not so Nathan Wass. He kept silence for some days, till he could bear it no longer. Then he said:

"Lad, what ails thee? Thou art nursing wrath, I'm a-thinking."

"Happen I am!"

"What's the trouble, lad? Speak it out."

"And why? What is the use of going to a dry cow for milk?" said Abel, with bitterness in his tone.

Nathan looked hard at him ere he said:

"Thou art wounded, thou art sore, or thou wouldstna say that o' me. When hast thou found me dry to thy thirst? Lad,

I'd give thee my blood and gladly!" And the old man's voice quivered with emotion.

Abel went up to him and put his hand on his shoulder, saying:

"Forgive me, Nathan. You have been a father to me, and a mother, and I should be an ungrateful dog if I didn't act like a son to you."

"Thou hast been a good lad to me, Abel—better nor most sons. It cut me to the quick to hear thee say I was dry to thy thirst. I know thy meaning well enow. And by the same token, I judge there's trouble atwixt thee and thy lassie."

Then in a few words Abel told him of his shameful interview with the miller. A grim smile overspread the old man's face, and his eyes kindled with a dangerous light.

"Hast toud the smith, Kneebone, of it?" he asked.

"No, not yet."

"Well, tell him, lad. Art going to give up the lass?"

Abel gave a short laugh that spoke volumes.

"That's right, lad. At the start I was agen the thing, but I'm none so sure I'm agen it now. If she'll stick to thee, just thee stick to her, and let the miller go hang. But have a chat with thy—thy master. I've a nation good opinion of him, lad. And now it's war, drat him, if I was a-dying I'd say, stick to the lassie, lad, stick to the lassie, and let the miller go hang, amen!"

Following Nathan's advice, Abel took an opportunity, the next day, of telling Kneebone of his trouble; and if he was surprised at Nathan's change of front, he was yet more surprised when Kneebone said:

"Happen the old man was right, after all. There's blood, mighty bad blood, dividing you two. I guess it's about time you two young ones parted for good, isn't it?"

Abel ran his hands quickly through his hair, a beautiful mass of closely lying ringlets; then for some moments he toyed with his long mustache, and then he uttered a short, incredulous laugh.

"You don't look at in that light, I see," said Kneebone, "and yet I wish you would. In fact, Abel, I've got a plan in my head which I think would work very well just now. I'm about tired of Voe already—nay, there is nothing to stare at, man. When a fellow has been a rolling stone for as many years as I have, he finds it hard to settle down in one place long. Now I want to go to South America, but I won't go alone. Let us go together. I'll pay you handsomely, lad."

"What to do?"

"Do? Why, nothing but keep me company and, and—catch insects and all sorts of vermin."

Abel burst out laughing.

"Nay, there's nothing to laugh at, unless it's the glorious fun of the thing. You know I've money enough; and think, lad, with your liking for nasty insects and things, what a splendid chance you'd have of studying Nature! All kinds of wonderful birds, and beetles, and moths, and serpents, and every kind of curious entomological horror. You shall have books, and preserving-cases, and a troop of cunning Indians to hunt for you, and—why, Lord bless me! you would come back and find yourself famous! It is better than hanging round here, an obscure village blacksmith, to be cursed and sworn at by a skunk of a miller. Don't you think so, lad?"

Abel did think so. Every nerve in his sensitive body quivered with excitement. The thrilling proposal appealed to his secret discontent, to his secret ambition, to his hunger for knowledge of life, to his inborn passion for the pursuits of a naturalist. It was the opportunity of a lifetime, and his whole nature sprang forward to embrace it. But to embrace it meant to desert Ruth, his own sweet-hearted Ruth. Could he do that? His smooth, handsome, dark-skinned face wore a look of anguish while the silent conflict raged within him. It did not last long, but while it lasted it was spiritual torture. He suddenly heaved a great sigh that sounded almost like a sob. Then he answered, quietly:

"You are very kind, sir, but I can't do it. I'll do as Nathan Wass said. I will stick to the lassie, and let the miller and South America go hang, amen!"

At this Kneebone sighed aloud, and said:

"In that case, there is nothing more to be said. But I am very sorry. Are you quite sure she will stick to you?"

"I've no fear on that score," answered Abel, smiling.

"I don't want to flatter you, but to my way of thinking you deserve the love of a right down good girl."

"And that I have got."

"Well, I hope so. Is she anything like her mother?" asked Kneebone, in a tone that struck Abel as peculiar.

"I couldn't say. Her mother died when I was a mere nipper. Why do you ask?"

"Ha! why indeed! I don't know—unless it is that I have been told some time or other that years ago your own father loved her mother. Was it true, do you know?"

"I believe he did. It was over Ruth's mother that the miller and my poor father fell out."

"Ha! that was a sorry day's work. I wonder if she was worth quarrelling over? I'd give something to know."

"Could any woman be worth such a quarrel?" said Abel, sorrowfully, thinking only of his lost father.

"Maybe not—if she wasn't christened Ruth. Happen I'm a fool just where I flatter myself I am wise. But, lad, it's an old belief with me that there are a few and only a few things in the world really worth quarrelling about. It doesn't matter just now what I think those few things are. But one of them is this—the love of a good woman. *That* is worth a fight any day. At least, if it is not, then there is nothing worth fighting for, and suffering for, under the sun. Do you know I have never once put eyes on your lassie, except on that dreadful night on the bridge? You must contrive to let me see her soon. I want to know her."

"She will only be too glad to know you. She often says she wishes you and the miller could have got on together. Shall you go to the Well-Dressing at Yewdle Brig?"

"Why, certainly. How are you getting on with your design? Shall you get first prize?"

"I'll try for it, anyway. I began work on it some time ago. But what I was going to say was, Ruth will be there, and you may get to know each other. She said last night she was going."

"Oh, then you do manage to meet, the miller notwithstanding?"

"Yes. We met at Violet Chalk's."

"And Mr. Silas Chalk?"

"Was not at home, you may be sure."

"Do you know where that excellent gentleman, Mr. Am Ende, was?"

"No."

"Well, I happen to know that he was lying on his belly in a hollow on the uplands, watching Chalk's cottage. It will pay you to keep your weather eye open, Abel."

CHAPTER XXVIII

A PIECE OF ARTISTRY

It was Holy Thursday, and Yewdle Brig was in festive attire in honor of its ancient annual custom of Well-Dressing. Old-time paganism, whether of the classic kind or native to these islands, was not well posted in theology, and was somewhat eccentric in many of its practices. But it was, nevertheless, fond of the open, lived face to face with nature, was favorable to a number of ideas that have since been declared poetical, and looked kindly upon sundry pieces of conduct that were as quaint and beautiful and becoming as could well be desired. If in nothing else, paganism was good and true and beautiful in its floral festivals, in the perpetuation of which many good Christians of to-day attest their long descent from pagan ancestors. It was so in Yewdle Brig, where the streets were thronged with people dressed in their best Sunday clothes, who had come from far and near to celebrate the Well-Dressing.

The official part, so to speak, of the affair was simple and appropriate. After a brief service in the gray old church, the vicar, attended by his two curates and followed by choristers and crowd, marched from well to well, at each of which a hymn was sung and a prayer was read. After that, the secretly elected judges made their awards, which were signalized by rosettes of different colors, and then the spectators had the satisfaction of criticising the judicial critics. It was not always easy to detect the mysterious principle on which the three prizes were awarded; and it was no unusual thing for the public boldly to reverse the decision of the judges, and declare aloud that an unsuccessful competitor was the legitimate winner of the first prize.

There were only five wells to be dressed at Yewdle Brig, and hence there were but five dressers. Of these the best known and most popular was the young blacksmith of Voe, Abel Boden. For four years out of the six in which he had been a competitor he had carried off a prize; in two instances he had gained the first prize. In his marvellously skilful manipulation of flowers Abel had done no little to justify his beautiful Ital-

ian face that was worthy a born artist. This year he had conceived a bold and singular design. Oddly enough, the idea first occurred to him when the spate was hurrying him and Ruth forward to what appeared to be certain destruction. It came to him like a flash of inspiration, and he had worked it out with infinite patience and skill. Even his method of composition became more exalted and free and artistic. He still had his wooden frame, and his moistened clay mixed with salt, but he altogether discarded the paper pattern and the wooden skewer. His spirit felt buoyant, masterful, creative, and eager. Had he fallen upon the words:

"Lo! I must tell a tale of chivalry,
For large white plumes are dancing in mine eyes,"

he would have felt the innermost core of their meaning, and would have laughed within himself, being glad that a poet had been born expressly to provide for his fluttering spirit the bright, strong, mounting wings of poetry. For who when he is strong is not an egoist?

The principal well was in the market-place, and had been assigned to a resident competitor, while Abel had been allotted the most distant well of all. This was one known as the Oaken Well, which took its name from a huge hale oak-tree, several centuries old, that grew above it. It was on the roadside, away from the houses, and was flanked by hawthorn hedge and high grassy bank. Here Abel found himself very early on the morning of what was destined to be for him an eventful day. As usual, Nathan Wass had driven him over in his light broom-wagon, in which were carefully packed in boxes the different parts of Abel's design. These were unloaded as daintily as if they had been cases of costly china; after which the two men went to work to set up poles, to which they fastened a rick-cloth, that formed a circular barrier round the well, and concealed Abel and his work from the untimely gaze of the public.

Some people like to see the seamy side of a thing, such as the wind-cave in the bellows, or the matrix of the golden eggs of the goose; by the same token they pay a heavy price for their ill-conditioned curiosity. As, however, we have no desire to go to market with such buyers, now that Abel is hard at work behind the rick-cloth, we can afford to leave him there undisturbed for a solid six hours.

The mid-day chimes were playing, as Christopher Kneebone sauntered into the crowded market-place at Yewdle Brig. Presently he found himself quite near to a small group of ladies and gentlemen, who were chatting and laughing merrily. The

group included a baronet, a justice of the peace, a colonel of yeomanry, Squire Saxton, and "Gentleman" Phythian. From the men Kneebone glanced at the ladies, and, somehow, he had a distinct and peculiar sensation as he recognized among them Janoca herself.

It was not Kneebone's manner to avoid meeting any one, yet for a moment he felt like turning aside; but he held on his way, and something that was not a thousand leagues removed from pride straightened his back somewhat, and slightly elevated his chin. As far as personal appearance went, he looked quite as well as any one of the local magnates in front of him, while his clothes, thanks to good Yankee tailoring, fitted him as most of theirs did not fit them. Still he was only the blacksmith of Voe; he was not one of them; while, as his glance rested upon the stately figure of Janoca, he was conscious of wishing that he had been one of them. Elsewhere, in half a dozen great cities of the world, as Job Else & Company he could hold his head high, among men whose looks were proud, and whose names were potent in the magic circles of finance. But here in quaint Yewdle Brig, a veritable Sleepy Hollow, the weight of early associations lay upon him like shackles of iron. He knew well enough that he had only to gild himself and straightway he would become one of the gilded clique. But feelings are tyrannous things, and he felt himself to be neither Christopher Kneebone nor Job Else & Company, but simply Abel Boden, head shepherd to the squire there, who just now glanced at him, and did not even seem to recognize his own village blacksmith!

Would Janoca's sight also fail her? The squire was well known to be short-sighted, and Kneebone knew him too well to misjudge him. But Janoca Phythian had the sight of a hawk, and if—well, if heaven was kind, he would be able to pass without her seeing him. Involuntarily he drew from his waistcoat-pocket a brand-new toothpick, and put it between his teeth. Thus armed, he sauntered easily on, his glance no longer on the group, but thrown straight forward. He looked the very embodiment of easy, unaffected *nonchalance*, yet his heart was throbbing with unwonted energy, and his spirit was playing a passionate part in the swift and subtile comedy of life.

He was on a line with the group now. His elbow actually touched the squire's back as he passed him. But he was really past them at last, and he was wondering if Janoca Phythian was that moment looking at his back, and if she would recognize him—among a million backs he would have known hers,

he thought—when suddenly he heard—ye gods, what a thrill went through him as he heard the voice and caught the words:

“Mr. Kneebone! Mr. Kneebone!”

For a second he stood rooted, then he took a step forward, and then with a quiet smile on his bronzed face he turned quickly round, and saw in a flash two things. First, he saw that every eye in the group was upon him; for which, however, in his present mood, he cared not a red cent. Next, away from the group by half his own distance, he saw Janoca Phythian, her hand outstretched, and on her face one of her rare smiles. Seeing which, the world for Kneebone passed clean out of existence, and in those dark, lustrous eyes he saw the heavens opened!

“I am so glad we have met, Mr. Kneebone. Quite an event has befallen me, do you know? I have actually caught on the wing, as it were, a new idea for our—your Memorial Hall.”

“Indeed! I am delighted to hear it. I am sure your—*our* Memorial Hall will be so much the gainer by it.”

Janoca missed none of the subtlety of his speech; she gave him a quick, interrogatory glance, and then another of those all-conquering smiles, which made the level-headed man in front of her feel almost dizzy.

“You will not laugh at my idea—promise me?”

“I promise faithfully,” answered Kneebone, laughing.

“Well, it is nothing else than a—a nursery, a public nursery,” said Janoca, and the faintest of blushes tinged her face.

Kneebone looked at her, and his face was preternaturally grave.

“I dare not laugh, Miss Phythian, but I should awfully like to,” he said, solemnly.

“No, I will do the laughing,” she replied, as she broke out in a merry laugh. Then she said: “You do not care for the idea much, I fear?”

“I don’t know about that. The truth is, I don’t quite grasp it. Will you tell me something more about it, please?”

“Oh, yes. A good many of the poor women have young children, which they often find it very difficult to leave when they wish to go out to work. Sometimes the mothers are compelled to stay at home on that account. More frequently the children are left to take care of themselves as best they can. I have known a child of eighteen months to be tied in its chair, day after day, in front of a made-up fire, given its bottle and rattle, and left there alone while its mother went out to do a day’s washing.”

“May I laugh?” gasped Kneebone.

Janoca looked surprised, but answered sweetly:

"Certainly."

Kneebone laughed, not loud, but deep and gloriously. Then, seeing a shadow on the radiant face, he said, penitently:

"I know it is very wrong of me, wicked and heartless, but I couldn't help it. There is something irresistibly comical in that picture of the little urchin tied up in front of the fire, helping himself to a lonely meal. But I think I see your point now. You would hire a nurse to look after them, and bring all the dotlings to the Hall, and have clean sweet rooms for them, and pretty cots to sleep in, and a cart-load of toys, and—and—well, it's a capital idea, as pretty as it is wise and tender. Two or three more such ideas, and our Memorial Hall will be as full of blessed use as it shall be of beauty."

"You agree to it, then?" said Janoca, her sweet face lit up with pleasure.

"I thank you sincerely for giving me the opportunity of doing so. It is worth building a hall if only to carry out such an excellent idea. The little chap with the bot——"

"Why, my dear sir, who would have thought of seeing you in Yewdle Brig!"

Kneebone turned half round, and looked the speaker in the face: it was the baronet of the group. Their hands met, but Kneebone's was unusually limp, while his face was an absolute blank.

"Don't you remember me? I am Sir Gervase Ruby."

Kneebone shook his head.

"I was introduced to you three years ago last May in Delmonico's in New York, by my friend, the Honorable Ebenezer Washington Barker, United States Senator. We met again at the Union, you remember."

"They seem pleasant memories; I wish I could say I shared them. They know both how to cook and how to charge at Delmonico's, I believe. Haven't you mistaken me for somebody else, some more fortunate individual?"

Sir Gervase Ruby looked a little put out. He looked keenly at Kneebone as he said: "Possibly I am mistaken, sir. Are you not Mr. Job Else, of Monte Video and San Francisco?"

At this Kneebone laughed.

"If you want to know who I am, ask this lady. I am Christopher Kneebone, the blacksmith of Voe."

"Goodness gracious! what a stupid blunder! Of course, now I look at you, I see—I might have known. I'm very sorry, my good man—how very absurd! Not a bit alike!"

And the baronet drew back and rejoined the group, and re-

lated the ludicrous incident of his mistaking the blacksmith of Voe for the great American wool-king, Job Else. As was natural, it furnished no little amusement for the group, and none laughed heartier, we may be sure, than Balthasar Phythian, who remarked:

"I know the man. He will see the fun as well as we do. Jano seems to have some business with him, and I think I will go and speak with him."

Bowing to the ladies, he left the group and came up to Janoca and Kneebone.

"And so you would not know Sir Gervase, eh?" he said, as he shook hands with Kneebone.

"I was just telling Mr. Kneebone, brother, that it really is not right of him to persist in playing the blacksmith to those who know he is not one," put in Janoca.

"But Sir Gervase Ruby is not one of those. You heard him say, as he went away, that we were not a bit alike. Besides, when I want to be known as Job Else I will carry the name. No Sir Gervase Ruby shall interfere with my plans," remarked Kneebone, with a decision of tone and purpose that Janoca could not do other than admire. She was prepared to like a man who knew his own mind and had a will of his own.

Chatting, they moved on together through the crowd of sight-seers, and presently, as luck would have it, they encountered Abel and Ruth. Cried Kneebone:

"Hallo, lad! we are looking for your well. Where is it?"

"It isn't far off. Have you seen the others?"

"No."

"Then suppose we look at them first? I haven't seen them myself yet."

This was assented to, and in the pairing that took place Janoca monopolized Abel, to whom she showed herself as a most brilliant, fascinating, and sympathetic woman. She might have been devoted to the primitive art of floral decoration, and an eager student of entomology, so easily and intelligently, and withal with such a gracious diffidence, in front of his superior knowledge, did she discuss these subjects. Thus she took captive the son of his father.

A short distance behind the Phythians and Abel, came Kneebone and Ruth. Very sweet and dainty the girl looked, dressed all in light blue, which was the color of the first prize; and so of course it soon would be, if it was not already, Abel's color. She knew that she was with a true friend of her lover, and she had a very natural desire to find favor in his sight. Under like circumstances, a girl of far less native sweetness and

strength of character than she would have been equal to the task of winning the good opinion of her companion; and Ruth very speedily found her way into the already swept and garnished house of Kneebone's affection.

Spite of etiquette and formality and conventional reserve, how quickly we can tell that any one likes us—almost as quick as we can detect dislike! Meeting the steady glance of his soft gray eyes, Ruth knew in a twinkling that she had found a new friend, and straightway there was formed within her a root of affection that was almost filial. And Kneebone, scanning her face for some trace of her mother, with an eagerness that was pathetic, failed utterly to find so much as a hint of poor, pretty, piquant, coquettish Alice Duckmanton; but he found instead the mouth, and nose, and eyes, and eyebrows of his own dear dead mother of saintliest memory. Ah me! ah me! these bits of roundabout heredity, coming suddenly upon us in unexpected quarters, how they shake us to the centre!

The first well they reached bore a yellow rosette, which was the third prize. At this Abel looked a little surprised.

"I didn't know the judges had been round yet," he remarked.

"Well, lad, if your favor isn't a blue one, I know somebody as will be disappointed," said Kneebone, glancing slyly at Ruth.

They passed on to another well. This was one of the unsuccessful ones, and had gained no prize, but the dresser, being of a practical turn of mind, was contented to appeal to the generosity of his numerous admirers and had naively planted a tin mug on a stone in front of his workmanship, and was kept fairly busy pocketing the pence that were dropped into it.

The next well was decorated with a red rosette, the second prize.

"You see, Mr. Boden, they have kept the blue for you, after all," said Janoca.

"It lies between us two now, that is certain," replied Abel, and his face was very grave. He was saying to himself, What if, after all, he had missed the prize? The thought stung him. He had always gone in to win, which meant a certain amount of enthusiasm and excitement on his part. But to-day the thought of failure affected him as it had never done before. He could not bring himself to contemplate it with calmness, for unless his design had been successful, its boldness would but render it ridiculous, and perhaps, too, in *her* eyes. And yet no, never that. Nothing that he had done would she ever think less than exquisitely beautiful, though all Yewdle Brig and the big world outside admired it with their tongues in their cheeks. Nevertheless, if he could only have had five minutes

alone at his well, he would quickly have settled the matter, in much the same way as Donatello settled the price of his bronze statue with the haggling merchant.

The well in the market-place came next. There was a crowd round it; and by this time something of Abel's excitement had touched all his companions. Slowly and in a compact group they worked their way through the throng, until at last they stood in front of the well. They gave one glance, and then a simultaneous "Oh!" broke from each member of the group, except Abel. He stood with his eyes riveted on—the *blue rosette*.

He had failed. Janoca laid her hand softly on his arm and said gently:

"Come, my friend, we came to see your work. We all know it is better than this."

"Not the least doubt about that, Boden. On all such occasions the judges are a set of solemn, ignorant donkeys, and never do the right thing except by accident," put in Balthasar, who felt sorry that justice required him to curb his indignation until he had actually beheld Abel's work.

Said Kneebone, in a tone that brought a hundred eyes upon him:

"When a giant strives with dwarfs, as a betting man I should back the dwarfs."

"What's that, mister?" shouted a rough fellow, a lead-miner, in the crowd.

"A parable, I should call it, which means that small things are best done by small people!"

"Thee durstna say as how this isna th' best bit o' work in Yewdle Brig to-day?" shouted the miner, in a half-threatening tone full of insolence.

Kneebone's soft gray eyes had been full of unwonted fire for some few minutes, and now they suddenly opened wide.

"I say it isn't worth the second prize, let alone the first. I say there is work in Yewdle Brig to-day that is worth this double over," he answered, his angry eyes fixed on the miner.

"All right, mister, and it's not me as 'ill say thou'rt wrong. I'm o' that way o' thinkin' mesen. But dash it if I didna think I were the only mon in Yewdle Brig to-day wi' eyes in my head. Good Lord! if it's a bit o' fine work that's wanted, it's to be found at th' Oaken Well, or my name isna Jim Bunting!" And with this the miner dived into the crowd and was lost to view, before Kneebone could get near enough to give him a shake of the hand.

Abel laughed a little scornfully, and said: "After that, I think we may as well go and have a look at the Oaken Well."

On their way thither, Ruth murmured in her lover's ear:

"Darling, why are you so put out about it? You never seemed to mind much which way it went before to-day."

"Nor did I, not a straw compared with what I mind to-day. Ruth, there has been foul play going on somewhere. My work, though I say it, is kings and queens beside the best work here."

"My love, do you think I doubt it?"

"O lassie, lassie, I'm very sore about it, for your sweet sake. You won't be vexed at it when you see it, will you? Happen I've been too bold."

If she could only have put her arms round his neck and kissed him! She did manage to get his hand in hers just for a moment, unobserved, and she gave him a look that rendered words superfluous.

And now their nerves began to tingle, for in front of them was the Oaken Well, about which hundreds of people were gathered, evidently in a state of excitement, judging from the hubbub of voices and the vehement gesticulations. Kneebone stepped forward and put his arm through Abel's, while Balthasar fell behind with Janoca and Ruth. Just as they touched the edge of the crowd, above the noise was heard the loud, defiant voice of Jim Bunting, the lead-miner, shouting:

"This is the work of a giant, an' t'others be dwarfs, and yet he hanna got a prize. Damned if I think that's fair play!"

A great roar of applause greeted this sentiment.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE UNJUST JUDGE

SAID Kneebone, laughing: "That is plagiarism with a vengeance. But I forgive him, the scamp." Then he turned, and taking Ruth by the arm, said to the Phythians:

"We must try and get in front somehow."

"Very well; though I hate a crowd like this. Jano, I shall look to you for protection," said Balthasar, with comical gravity.

Just then Kneebone looked round to address a remark to Abel, but the latter had vanished and was nowhere to be seen.

"Happen he is better left alone a bit," said Kneebone, in a sympathetic tone, to Ruth.

Then they began the difficult task of wedging themselves through the dense mass of excited humanity. It was slow work; but patience and tact and good-nature are excellent lubricants, and will ease one's way through worse difficulties than an English holiday crowd.

It is recorded of a certain handsome young fellow that, running one day against a barrow-woman in the street, and turning round to mollify her anger, she said: "Where are you driving to, you great hulking good-for-nothing—beautiful fellow; God bless you!" Now Kneebone was neither young nor handsome, nevertheless he was able with impunity to poke backs, dig ribs, and tread on toes, for his genial humor and pleasant tongue disarmed resentment and appeased the surliest. And at last they stood pressed against the stout cords that kept the crowd back from the well.

And this is what they saw: above the well, which was entirely hidden from sight, was a gracefully shaped alcove, containing a glimpse of a rocky cell, dotted with lichen and festooned with ferns, with a bit of wild lovely garden beyond, and overhead was the tenderest of blue skies flecked with soft white clouds. Immediately in front of the grotto was a rough earth-colored cross, beside which knelt in life-size the Madonna, with clasped hands and bowed head. She was habited in a skirt of creamy white, over which was a gorgeous violet robe blazoned with suns and moons and stars; a halo was about

her head, and her knees were deep in wild flowers. There were butterflies here and there, and one—an exquisite creation of black and yellow and purple and red—had settled on the hem of the Madonna's robe. But the climax, the soul and centre of the whole piece, was the Madonna's face, and lo!—*it was the face of Ruth*. There was no mistaking it. It was lifelike. The whole scene might have been a *tableau vivant* of Ruth herself. Along the front of the alcove, in Old English letters, were the words

Regina Virginum.

The design was indeed bold; it was almost startling in its boldness. But then the execution was superb and incomparable. At a distance of twenty feet it seemed well-nigh incredible that that wonderful piece of artistry should be composed entirely of flowers. It looked like a piece of sculpture richly painted, and enshrined in mosaic work of beautiful stones, cunningly inlaid, and blended here and there with real flowers and ferns to deceive the eye. The very wings of the flower-built butterfly on the Madonna's robe seemed to quiver as if alive. On closer inspection, however, the malachite resolved itself into bright green twigs of the yew-tree, and the lapis-lazuli grew into the crisp flowers of the wild hyacinth, and the rich marbles and porphyry were recognized as double daisies, crimson and pink and white. Berries, rice, lichens, furze-blossoms, king-cups, laburnums, and rhubarb flowers, together with a multitude of wild growths of every color and tint—all were pressed into the service of art, and made by magical skill to support the illusion of costly jewels, and precious stones, and rare fabrics, and the rarer and richer play of light and shade.

The like had never been seen in Yewdle Brig. Yewdle Brig was accustomed to one stereotyped style of well-dressing, which was repeated with small variations from year to year. That style was admirably illustrated by the well in the market-place, which had secured the first prize. Here the design was nothing but a set of formal arabesques, faultlessly regular and meaningless, combined with sundry symbols, such as doves, vases, crosses, and the like, together with passages of Scripture, appropriate or otherwise. Obviously, this kind of floral design and composition was separated *toto cælo* from Abel's. The one was artistry, the other handicraft.

Said Janoca, after she had gazed in silence for some time: "What a glorious piece of work! I should not have thought it possible. And what a superb compliment! My dear Ruth, it is fit for a duchess."

"A duchess? It is fit for a saint. And, Jano, with due modesty, I opine that a saint is one degree higher than a duchess," observed Balthasar.

As for Ruth, she said not a word; and by the same token she showed she was a wise girl. For what word could she have spoken that would have been at all adequate to the occasion? Had she been alone with her Abel, peradventure she would have compassed some word or act which the young fellow would have counted adequate. We make this observation in the light of the knowledge of what actually took place the first time the girl found herself alone with her lover. It was something very womanly, and passionate, and sweet, and pretty, and delicious, and—and—well, the young man felt that it was adequate.

And Kneebone, like Ruth, was silent, ominously silent, and a frown was upon his face. Janoca watched him intently for a while; then she said to him in a low, sweet voice:

"Mr. Kneebone, I think I should like to get away from these people. My brother is taking our Ruth, and I am afraid you will have to take me."

Kneebone looked on her noble face, now tinged with a soft blush, and his frown fled in an instant.

"No greater pleasure. I wish I could only take you——" He paused on the very edge of a precipice. "For good and all," was what he was going to say; and suppose he had actually said it! The idea made him tingle all over. He added, "a quicker way out of the crowd."

Pitiably lame! miserably tame! A bounding stag at the start was his sentence, and at the finish no better than a wretched sheep halt with foot-rot.

Yet why did Janoca turn aside, unless it was to conceal the quick, deep blush that dyed her face? And why the man-slaying blush? Did she hear that idiomatic phrase "for good and all," as it fell unspoken from his tongue to his heart? Who can tell? Ofttimes it seemeth a man's flesh and bones are but as transparent glass to a woman's glance, so that she seeth the secret thought in his brain, and the coiled and hidden love in his heart, while as yet he is but dimly aware of their existence. Boot and saddle, and mount quickly as the man may, the woman will yet have scoured over every highway and byway in the wide wild domain of his nature, ere he has ridden the length of his park palings.

On the edge of the crowd Kneebone inquired of Janoca if she was returning home soon.

"I think so," she answered. "Are you?"

"Not just yet. They have got it into their heads, and rightly too, I'm thinking, that there has not been fair play. I am going to stay and see what comes of it. Will you see Ruth back safely?"

"Oh, yes, we will look after her, you may depend. But—I think you had better come with us."

There was a distinct note of entreaty in her tone, for she was really beginning to feel alarmed at the tumult around her. But Kneebone, though he caught the tone, shook his head, and answered:

"If it is only ignorance, well and good; but if there is something worse at bottom, there will be a row, and I shall be in it too. But it will only be a tempest in a teacup, you know," he added, seeing his companion's face grow very serious.

A little later the Phythians and Ruth moved away, and Kneebone with a frown on his face re-entered the crowd. It had got wind that something was up at the Oaken Well, which instantly became the centre of attraction for scores that had failed to find any special interest in it before. But it would be safe to say that, for every such score, there were a hundred indignant admirers of Abel's workmanship.

The road was blocked, and the excitement began to grow intense; it showed itself in occasional cheers, bursts of fierce shouting, loud denunciations of the judges, and strange unintelligible murmurs, like the growl of some half-awakened monster. The situation was critical, and nothing was needed but an idea and a leader to render it dangerous. Suddenly the stentorian voice of Jim Bunting, the lead-miner, was heard high above the din, calling out:

"Who be the judges? Let 'em come and tell us th' rayson why. Happen they're on'y foo's and not knaves. Where be they?"

For a moment a silence that was startling fell upon the multitude, and then a hoarse roar of applause rent the air. Just then, right in the centre of the crowd, a lively little scrimmage seemed to be taking place on its own account. In another moment shouts were heard of:

"Here's one of them." "A judge! a judge!" "Hoist him up! hoist him up!" "Order, order! silence for the judge!"

The crowd swayed and parted, and there, on the high bank beside the well, held by the miner and several other self-constituted jailers, stood a short, sturdy, jolly-faced fellow of about fifty, puffing and panting, but perfectly self-possessed and smiling like a popular hero. He looked so plucky and game that when somebody cried out: "Three cheers for the

bantam!" they were given with gusto. He bowed and smiled, and took off his dented hat, and said:

"I suppose you want to know why this very beautiful piece didn't get a prize? Well, I will tell you. It was simply because there were three judges instead of one. If there had only been one judge, and that one your humble servant, Mr. Abel Boden of Voe would have been declared the winner of the first prize by a walk-over."

Long and loud was the cheering that greeted this declaration, during which the speaker put on his hat and seemed willing to descend from his exalted station. But the miner's hold did not relax, and when the noise had subsided, he said:

"You hanna tow'd us why t'other two was agen him."

"No, I know that, and I am not going to, either."

"Binna ye? An' why not, mister?" asked the miner, in an ironical tone.

"For a very good reason—because I don't know. Yet, hang it! I won't lie about it. I reckon I do know; but what then? Their reason wasn't mine, as I have told you. And if you want to know their reasons, go and ask them. They are old enough, I trow, to answer for themselves."

"That sounds well enow, mister. Happen, though, we dunna know 'em. What might their names be?"

The jolly-faced man put on his considering-cap at this for some little time.

"Give us their names, man!" cried a voice from the crowd, which sounded very like Kneebone's.

"Well, I don't see why I shouldn't. The one is Mr. Reuben Sayles, grocer in Cow Lane, and the other is Mr. Luke Boden, the miller at Voe. You all know him. He is the uncle of the clever young fellow who did this." And the speaker pointed dramatically to Abel's work.

Now it happened that throughout the surrounding district and for miles beyond, the favorite brand of flour was a particular kind that came from the mill at Voe and was known as Boden's Beauty; and the only tradesman in Yewdle Brig that could obtain the coveted commodity was Mr. Reuben Sayles, grocer in Cow Lane. The monopoly was profitable, and the excluded tradesmen were correspondingly sore. It was, properly enough, a grocer's assistant who now shouted out: "Sayles' vote meant Boden's Beauty!" The crowd understood the allusion perfectly, and roared with delight at the sally. The miner, not to be behindhand in the pleasant art of reading motives, cried out:

"It's as plain as a pike-staff now. Who hasna heard o' th'

grudge Miller Boden has agen his nevvv? An' for why? Because he had a quarrel wi' th' lad's fader o'er twenty years sen. Says I—shame on him!" (Tumultuous applause.) "As for the grocer, it 'ud do him no great harm to dust him o'er pretty thick wi' some o' his Boden's Beauty. He's on'y a too' o' th' miller's, though, th' poor, miserable critter! Now I'd like to know what right th' miller's got to come here and play his game o' spite and malice in public? We none want any of his quarrel here, and if you be o' my way o' thinkin', we'll have none of it. He's an Unjust Judge, an' we'll have none o' him at Yewdle Brig. Just look at this here—thing o' beauty. Not wuth a prize! Did 'em so-cawed judges tak' us to be their own brothers, the hid-yuts! There, I'm done; I want a drink. All I've got to say is—here be my sixpence toward giving summat handsome to the young man as was clever enow, ay, and kind enow, to do for us this—this here thing o' beauty!" With this, he pulled forth a sixpence, and, as a mark of his confidence in the integrity of his prisoner, deposited it in the hat of the jolly-faced man.

There was something peculiarly English in this practical and common-sense action of the miner. The crowd was in the right frame of mind for anything in the shape of follow my leader, from demolishing the work of the successful well-dressers to attacking the shop of Reuben Sayles. A Continental Jim Bunting would instinctively have seized the tempting opportunity, and in the name of some fine principle would have headed the mob and executed a neat little riot. But being only a plain Englishman, a level-headed Peakshire lad, with a fair sense of common justice and a strong love of flowers and well-dressings, having no restless egotism to curb, and no political dreams to realize, and no fine principles to vindicate, he quietly wound up with a general subscription instead of a riot. Tame, stupid, and inglorious. *Oui, oui, messieurs, mais—c'est à l'Anglaise.*

The people, unconscious of an anti-climax, cheered loudly, pulled out their sixpences, shillings, and half-crowns, collected thirty pounds in half the number of minutes, and deputed the jolly-faced judge and the lead-miner to seek out Abel Boden at Voe and present the money in suitable terms.

Then they groaned for the miller and grocer, and cheered like mad for Abel Boden and the lead-miner and the jolly-faced judge, after which they sang "Rule Britannia" and "God save the Queen," and with a comfortable sense of having done their duty, they began rapidly to disperse.

So far everything was lawful and orderly; but the imp of misrule, which can sniff a crowd farther than a vulture can sight a

dead camel, had not had any innings, and was feeling sore thereat, and must needs seek an opportunity of organizing an impromptu game on his own behoof. And as bad luck would have it, it found what it was seeking, in this wise. After the awards had been made, the miller retired to the Royal George Inn, and, in company with the too complaisant Reuben Sayles, grocer of Cow Lane and vendor of Boden's Beauty, partook of a glass of cold gin and water. He did this with some show of dignity, being conscious that, as a man of substance, he was conferring a mark of favor upon the grocer by drinking with him in public. Then he mounted his gig and drove off, bound for a village eight miles distant.

On the return journey, and when about a mile and a half out of Yewdle Brig, who should suddenly emerge from an old dis-used engine-house, a short distance from the roadside, but Mr. Reuben Sayles. The miller pulled up and the grocer advanced, pale and agitated.

"Well, what now? You look frightened," said the miller.

"I've come to warn you, sir. Don't go nigh Yewdle Brig. It isn't safe, it isn't safe," cried the grocer, his teeth seeming to chatter with terror.

"And why not?" inquired the miller.

"The people are up against the awards. There's a fine crowd down at the Oaken Well; I heard them cheering and hooting right up to the shop, sir. When I got away they were getting ready to sack the place, and they threatened to do to us both the Lord knows what. They would murder us, if they caught us. Don't go nigh the place, Mr. Boden, if you value your life!"

At this the miller's face flushed a purple red, and with an oath he said:

"They would probably hang you for an arrant coward, and happen it would serve you right. But they'll leave me alone, or I'll teach 'em to. Go on, Spanker."

He gathered up the reins as he spoke, and drove on, leaving the monopolist of Boden's Beauty trembling by the hedge-side. Whatever else he might be, the miller was no coward. Entering the town, he drove down Cow Lane, half expecting to find Sayles' shop had been wrecked. On the contrary, however, the shop was all right, and there was not a trace of the crowd. At the foot of the lane, the road to the left carried him out of the town and Voeward, while the road to the right would bring him into the market-place and thence to the Oaken Well. Mentally, and mentally only, he halted for a moment at the turn, and then with a muttered "Curse them, I'll drive over 'em if they don't clear out!" he took the turn to the right.

By this time the crowd at the well had dispersed, and things were settling down to a merry holiday level. The market-place was pretty full of pleasure-seekers, and, under the most favorable circumstances, a vehicle would have passed through but slowly and with difficulty; under existing circumstances, a prudent man would have chosen the back streets for driving. But the miller was on his mettle, and must needs drive through the very thick of the crowd. Several groups, one after the other, dissipated at his approach; for Spanker was a young horse, strong and full of fire, and came on with pricked ears and that peculiar dancing gait which suggests mischief.

At last he found himself in front of a more dense crowd of people surrounding a performing bear. "Way, there!" he shouted, and drove straight on. The crowd did not move, but Spanker did. In another moment the air was rent with the screams of women and children, and the angry voices of men, as Spanker danced right in among them and began to rear. By good luck, nobody was injured; the crowd scattered in a trice, and the miller drove on, recking little for the angry cries that assailed him. Oddly enough, no one had seemed to recognize him so far; but he had not proceeded more than twenty yards, when suddenly a child's voice sang out: "There goes th' miller, th' Unjust Judge! Boo! boo! boo-o! Unjust Judge!"

It was like putting a match to a powder-train, so swiftly, fiercely, universally was the cry taken up. The miller heard, and smiled grimly, and shook the reins, saying: "Get along out of this, Spanker." The horse sprang forward and then stopped short. There were men at his head holding him, and others swarming about the shafts, and others about the wheels, and in all directions people were running toward him, and fierce curses were in the air. With a fearful oath the miller brought his whip down on Spanker, who sprang right off the ground, and then began to kick out his rage.

"Cut the reins!" "Pull off the harness!" "Out with the miller!" "To the pond with the Unjust Judge!" "Duck him, duck him!" cried a hundred voices.

The miller heard the cries, and saw the seething crowd, and a deadly fear and sickness of spirit seized him. And no wonder, for his chances of life were very few and small just then. Three rough fellows sprang into the gig to pull him out, and the miller fought them for his life. It was a fearful sight, and the crowd, not yet maddened enough to be brutal, watched the struggle with silent and panting interest, half horrified and half delighted.

The miller was overpowered; they were dragging him down,

when a man forced his way through the crowd, leaped on to the shafts, and seizing the nearest of the miller's assailants, threw him to the ground. An angry shout came from the on-lookers, and half a dozen rowdies, who were spoiling for a fight, made for the miller's champion, to pull him down. But he jumped nimbly into the vehicle, and picking up the miller's stout walking-stick, which lay upon the bottom, he shouted: "Keep back there! I'll brain the first man of you who comes nigh, you——"

Down with a swing came the stick, but the fellow on the wheel dropped just in time to save his head from being cracked. Snap went the stick in two, broken on the tire. Quick as lightning the man turned, and grasping one of the two men who were merrily employed in choking the miller to death, he flung him neck and crop on to the swarm below. The same instant the miller realized that somebody was befriending him; and putting out his strength, he pitched the last of the three assailants over the tail-board. The gig was cleared of the enemy.

Back to back stood the miller and his champion, with clinched fists and flaming eyes, ready to sell their lives dearly. The miller was sorely battered and torn and blood-stained, but he had fight in him plainly enough; and so had his champion, who looked beautiful in his anger, and might have served an old-world sculptor for a model of a war-god. Thus they stood holding their enemies at bay, when Kneebone, who had just joined the crowd, forced his way to the front.

"My God!" he gasped, horror-struck, and his face went white.

"Pitch 'em out! Over with 'em! Turn the trap over! Like miller, like man! Turn 'em over!"

There was a yell and an ugly rush, but Kneebone was first. One foot on the step and another on the shaft, his hand glided to his hip and then it went high up in the air; there was a sudden gleam of steel, and then a loud report that frightened the crowd back into its senses. The rushers drew back quickly and there was a sudden silence. Said Kneebone, in his jauntiest manner:

"Look here, my children! this pretty toy is a revolver. It has six chambers, and five of them are loaded. I don't know how many cowards there are here, but I'm thinking there are more than there ought to be in a crowd of Englishmen. But if there are five fools among you—here's their cure." He tapped the revolver significantly. "Who is a fool? I will tell you, my children. He who maketh a rush for this trap is a fool; and, by heaven! I'll physic the first five of you, as sure as I am a living man!" With this, he got inside and took the reins in

his left hand. "You, there, holding this horse!" he shouted, "it's very kind of you, but I'd rather you didn't. Just give him his head, please."

They all fell back save one, a big burly fellow, who clung to Spanker's bridle, and loudly said he would be—well, condemned—if he let go.

"All right, my lad, don't. I won't kill you for it, but I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I am going to count three, and if your hand isn't off the rein by the time I've done I'll smash it with a bullet. You will find I am a man of my word. Now—one—two—th——"

The fellow could not stand it any longer; he loosed the rein and ran for his life! The crowd roared with laughter, but Kneebone looked very grave, for he had made up his mind, and two seconds later he would have put a bullet through the man's hand and have taken the consequences.

"Now, my children, the next time we meet I hope you will be sorry for having been so naughty. Good-day to you all."

He shook the reins and drove off at a good rattling pace, while the crowd looked at each other, and each thought his neighbor had in some way or other been making a fool of himself. In the gig the three men thus strangely thrown together sat in silence.

Half-way to Voe, Kneebone said: "I guess I'll get out and walk the rest."

Said Abel: "So will I." They got out.

Said the miller, gloomily: "I've had a bit of a grudge against you, blacksmith, but it's gone now. I'm much obliged to you." Then he looked at Abel, scratched his nether lip, that began to burn of a sudden, and said:

"I don't deny you stood up for me, but if it hadn't been for your confounded work there would have been none of this trouble to-day. I wish I might never put eyes on you again!" And he drove on.

CHAPTER XXX

THE PLATEAU MINE

KNEEBONE stood and watched the miller, until the gig turned a distant bend in the road and was hidden from sight. Then he heaved a deep sigh, and said:

"Well, and what do you think of him? He is a grateful coon, isn't he!"

"I'm thinking I shall never win him over," answered Abel, sadly.

"There is an old saying about heaping coals of fire on one's head. Seems to me it would take a coal-mine to make any effect in that quarter; and coals are dear nowadays, and are not to be wasted on worthless heads. That South American offer is still open, Abel."

The young man made no answer, only shook his head and presently sighed.

"Do you know," said Kneebone, after a while, "I begin to think he hasn't got a better nature to wrong."

"What do you mean?" asked Abel, whose thoughts were in—South America.

"The miller, to be sure. A while back I'd got a pretty theory that he was a sort of good man struggling with moral adversity. I pictured him doing violence to his better nature, and only wanting a good heft of circumstance to enable him to throw off his load of deviltry. I have known men like that. I have known men whose very longing to be good has only plunged them deeper into badness. It is a strange thing to say, I know: it seems like a contradiction in terms, and may be one for all I know or care. I know this much—that the world holds some very odd souls, as well as bodies. And if you try to interpret them by common rules you waste your pains. I thought the miller was one of these, maybe. And perhaps he is, and then, may the good Lord forgive me, but he is beyond me! I fear me, though, he hasn't got a better nature to wrong. Anyway, he is not to be bent. I wonder could he be broken? Broken! the scamp, broken!" And Kneebone mouthed the word broken, as though he found the idea sweet,

And from this day of the well-dressing, Christopher Kneebone began to familiarize himself with the thought of an active opposition to the miller, in Abel's behalf. He had hoped—ah me! how he had hoped! But his very first night in Voe, when the miller came to him after the sale, had played havoc with a dozen sweet and generous dreams concerning his brother—dreams, any one of which might reasonably have become actual fact, and, as such, would have made the home-coming of the much-travelled and versatile man an event fit to be commemorated in song. But in this later day, fit occasions of song are scarce as fit singers; and Kneebone's possible epic has assumed the shape of an indifferent piece of prose. Poor Kneebone! Poor Proseman!

It was some weeks after the Yewdle Brig affair before Kneebone made any move in the direction of antagonism with the miller. It came about in a rather singular manner. One fine evening Kneebone thought he would stroll as far as the little tufa cottage on the edge of the wood, and spend an hour with old Nathan Wass. On his way thither he came within sight of an old overgrown path that ran in zigzag fashion up a steep hillside. Something like a shiver went through him as he suddenly remembered that it ran past a certain old lead-mine that might very well have been his tomb. Ere the shiver had spent itself he had turned aside and was climbing the hill. He reached the place, a plateau under the brow of the hill, sat down on a large stone, and looked about him.

The sun was dipping behind a distant hill-range, and a great sea of glory, the concentrated beauty of the universe, stretched from the purple-black shores of earth far away toward the land where there is no night. A seraph familiar with the scenery of his own clime might have found a new sensation and an unknown joy in gazing westward at such a time. Yet such a thing is familiarity, and such a thing is human egotism, that the man never once consciously raised his eyes to behold the heavenly splendor, but kept them fixed on the heap of rough stones that covered the mouth of the mine. And after all, what solar splendor and mystery could compare with the dread fascination of a cairn of gray stones that, for one living man, marked your violent grave? Nothing had changed. Not a stone seemed to have moved or mellowed. And for all these long, long years, in the mind of Luke, these stones had hidden the murdered body of his brother.

Kneebone wondered what his feelings had been; if he ever had the nightmare. It was an uncomfortable thought that he, Kneebone, had a brother who actually for twenty years had

thought himself an undiscovered murderer, and yet had neither been killed with remorse nor yet had killed himself, nor even gone mad, but had just lived on, and kept his liver all right, and grown fat. As a moral curiosity he was perhaps a brother to be proud of, if it were not for one's prejudices, thought Kneebone. Then he fell to wondering if Luke ever feared discovery, and if he ever came to visit the spot—a speculation on which the miller himself could have thrown a lot of light. And not sunlight, nor fantastic moonlight, nor mysterious starlight, but a ghastly phosphorescent light, such as might flash from the black mouth of some desolate volcano, and form the medium through which lost spirits show their faces to each other, when they lust for sympathy and are capable only of scorn.

In a little while Kneebone heard some one coming down the hill; the land jutted, and the path curved round it, so that he was unable to see who it was. He sat still and waited, and soon round the curve and on to the plateau came—the miller. Involuntarily Kneebone rose, and the two men stood and stared at each other, speechless. Kneebone was the first to find words, and he said:

“Good-evening, miller. Do you often come here?”

“Good-evening, blacksmith. Yes, I come pretty often.”

“To see the sunset, I suppose? It looks like a fine day to-morrow.”

“No; I come for—my health. Walking agrees with me, and I like a bit of climbing.”

“And so you come down hill for a climb?” laughed Kneebone, with a note of irony.

The miller laughed too, but uneasily, and he seemed a bit vexed at Kneebone's tone. He was passing on when Kneebone said:

“This is an old lead-mine, isn't it?”

“It is,” growled the miller.

“There isn't much done with mines round here now, I hear.”

“They are worked out.”

“Well, I don't know about that.”

“Indeed!”

“I'm thinking the water has stopped a good many of them, and in the course of time people forget this, and fall back on the notion that they are worked out. Some of these mines, I am told, have been shut up for fifty or a hundred years. How long is it since this mine was worked, think you?”

“Oh, long afore my time,” answered the miller, almost impatiently.

"Well, there's a case in point. Do you happen to know why it was closed?"

"Drat it if I know or care! I've heard tell it was worked out, though. If you doubt it, you had better get the squire to let you reopen it. A cheap rent will satisfy him, I'm thinking," replied the miller, running into his tone the contempt he felt at the blacksmith meddling with mines, and chattering in glib Yankee style of what he knew nothing about. The miller always thought of the blacksmith as a Yankee, though he knew that he claimed to be an Englishman.

If Kneebone was nettled he did not show it. In a half-confidential tone he remarked:

"Would you really, as a practical man, Mr. Boden, advise me to reopen it?"

"What on earth do you mean?" cried the miller, in scornful wonder.

"You probably know the reputation of each of these mines. As an experiment, would you say that this identical mine was as desirable a one as any to open?"

"Yes, if you want to show you are a born fool."

"Not otherwise?" inquired Kneebone, whose desire for the kernel of knowledge seemed to rise superior to the roughness of the shell inclosing it. He was so much in earnest that a slight frown was visible between his eyebrows.

"I should say not," replied the miller, emphatically.

"I am sorry to hear you say that."

"Indeed!"

"Because I am going to play the fool, in that case, I am afraid."

The miller, who had stood during this colloquy with his back half turned upon Kneebone, swung himself round of a sudden, exclaiming:

"You are not going to open up this mine, surely?"

"I am thinking of it, soon. It's my idea there's money in it, when once it is pumped dry. The squire hasn't signed the agreement yet, to be sure, though he will, no doubt. There is no reason why you shouldn't know; but I should be glad if you would consider it confidential between us, for a few weeks. You see, I'd rather it wasn't talked about till everything is settled."

"O my God!" gasped the miller, and his broad red face grew white as a winter's moon.

Kneebone looked away over the hills, and took no notice of his companion. The miller pulled himself together, and said in a husky voice: "I am thinking somebody will be ruined

then." Then, without another word, he continued his way down the steep slope. Kneebone, watching him, said to himself: "He staggers like a drunken man. It is my first blow for the lad. And when you begin hitting, I say, hit hard. O Luke, Luke! if our dead mother had foreseen this!" And Kneebone buried his face in his hands, and his hands grew wet.

That same evening, late as it was, Squire Saxton received two callers. They came so close together that the squire was closeted with one, when the other arrived and was shown into a room, to wait until the owner of Owlcote Park and many a broad acre besides was at liberty. Entering as usual through the keyhole, we are in time to hear the squire exclaim:

"Why, my good sir, they will think we are both mad! I know the history of the mine perfectly. It would take a couple of thousand pounds to pump it dry, if it took a penny; and then it would be utterly worthless to you. You would not get a pig of lead out of it in a year."

"That would be my lookout, sir, not yours."

"But in self-defence, Mr. Kneebone. They would say I had deceived you."

"Oh, I would very soon enlighten them on that score."

"Then it would be at the risk of your own reputation for worldly wisdom. For the project really is—you will pardon me, but it really is ridiculous."

"All the same, sir, I have known men out in the diggings who have 'struck oil,' while their neighbors thought they were only showing with unnecessary diligence that they were born fools."

There was a short interval of silence; the squire seemed to be reflecting. At length he said:

"I was thinking that, as you seem to have set your mind upon the thing, you had better have the best chance possible. The Plateau mine, as I say, is worthless. But there is the Chiselwick mine, which, I think, is worth something; it was never properly worked. The water broke in just when, as I think, they were going to make a good thing of it. I have always thought there was money in it myself. Now, if you like, I will grant you a lease of that."

"You are very kind, sir, and I will take it on one condition."

"What is that?"

"That you will let me have the Plateau mine as well!"

The squire laughed heartily. "Well, I am willing," he said, "on one condition."

"What is that, sir?"

"That you won't work it!"

"All right," laughed Kneebone, "I'll take it on that condition. I may fool about the top of it a bit, I suppose?"

"Yes, to your heart's content."

"And of course none but ourselves will know that I am not to work it?"

"Oh, certainly." A little later Kneebone left the hall.

"Ah! good-evening, Mr. Boden. I am sorry to have kept you waiting so long," said the squire, with his habitual cordiality, as the miller entered the room just vacated by Kneebone. The squire was under no sort of obligation to the miller, who, the night at the sale of the Jack Wragg place apart, had more than once gone out of his way in order to exhibit what he doubtless called his personal independence. But the master of Owlcote Hall was not the man to obtrude such reminiscences under his own roof. After some general talk, the miller gathered sufficient courage to broach the subject that filled his mind in every nook and cranny.

"I dare say you'll think it strange, squire, but I've been thinking lately of doing a bit in the lead-mining way."

"Indeed!" and the squire slightly elevated his eyebrows.

"It may be an outlandish notion of mine, but I've taken a fancy to the old Plateau mine, and if we could come to terms I should like to have a working lease of it for a few years."

"You are sure it is the Plateau mine you want?"

"It's none other, sir." The squire laughed right out. "You think I'm taking leave of my senses, happen?" observed the miller, who thoroughly sympathized with that outside view of the matter.

"There seems to be a mining epidemic abroad, and the run is all on the Plateau mine! I confess I do not understand it. Now a man like our new blacksmith——"

"A devilish prying, meddlesome Yankee, that's what he is, squire," interrupted the miller, with emphasis.

The squire smiled, and continued: "A man like that, who seems to have money enough to experiment with, who is a bit of a miner himself, I fancy—gold-miner, I mean—and who has formed a habit, so to speak, of chipping every rock he comes across, just to see if there is not a rich vein of quartz in it, I can understand a man like that casting a loving eye on an old lead-mine. But you, miller! And the Plateau mine at that!"

"You don't mean that he's got the start on me, I hope?"

"Well, if we must discuss it seriously, I may as well tell you at once that he has. I have promised him a lease of the Plateau mine."

"I shouldn't have looked for you to favor a new-comer like him before a native, sir."

The squire's face grew serious and his tone a little cold as he replied: "How should I be expected to know that a native would want to embark in such a—a speculation?"

"I'll outbid him, squire, to any amount."

"Didn't I say, Mr. Boden, that I had already promised him a lease? Since when have I been in the way of breaking my word—and for money?" The tone was quiet, and the contempt perfect. He rose as he spoke. The interview was ended.

And now the miller entered at a bound, as though driven forth by fiends, that wide and drear wilderness of the soul wherein are only bitter waters and sour kernels, trailing brambles and sharp rocks, and caves of darkness, the homes of the lizard and the bat. By day and by night, asleep or awake, he was haunted and pursued and at times surrounded by the hideous colossal shapes of terror, remorse, and toothless rage. They jeered him, they cheated him, they mauled him sore, they chanted in his ears the sad, hopeless, maddening rhymes of Hell. Ever before his eyes was—a scaffold. He had never seen a real one, and the thing of his imagination was ridiculously unlike the neat and ingenious instrument of the law's vengeance that is now in use; but if rude and clumsy, that creature of his brain was efficient, and a thing of exquisite and horrible torture.

Twenty years were a long time for a body to lie in water, and the miller spent many a dark hour speculating grimly upon how much would remain to tell the world of the long-hidden tragedy. There would be Abel's bones—he felt sure the bones would be there to witness against him; and Abel's well-remembered double-cased silver watch, with his name on the inside; and, yes, Abel's—boots! It was curious what a part in the phantasmagoria of horror these said imaginary boots played. When, by pitiable tricks of fancy, such as are known only to the fear-haunted, he had made away with every other trace of identity, there always remained to confront and confound him—the boots. Stout and stubborn, they refused to be manipulated, or spirited away, or subjected to any of the strange arts of mental alchemy. With a shudder the miller would murmur to himself again and again: "Them boots will hang me! Them boots will hang me!"

Every night the miller went to see what had been done at the mine; and when a fortnight had gone by without anything having been done, he began to feed himself on the wild hope

that, after all, Kneebone had abandoned the project of opening up the mine. But there came a night—the moon was sailing in and out among small black clouds—when, to his utter dismay, he found evidence that Kneebone still held to his purpose. On the plateau lay a load of bricks, and a few large pieces of timber; this meant the beginning of the end. After that, however, nothing further was done for the present. Week after week rolled heavily away. There lay the timber and the bricks, which could have only one meaning. Yet the actual work did not begin, and showed no signs of beginning, though it may very well begin any day.

It was this delay, this suspense, this fearful and horrible waiting for the worst, that hit the miller hardest. He lost his appetite for food, and found it for strong waters. He lost flesh, and gained color in the imperial purple line. His temper, always variable, became fixed and steady—invariably bad. In these days, Ruth had a sore time of it. She could generally diagnose her father with more than medical skill, but for once she failed. A terrible affair at Yewdle Brig, *ergo* a terrible uprising of the spleen, *ergo* a terrible loss of appetite: a simple argument, chock-full of common-sense and—error. The girl was very unhappy. That Yewdle Brig affair stung and humiliated her, and cut her to the quick. That they should dare to insult her father! That her father should have dared to deserve it! In these days her love for Abel was a precious balsam. The two lovers met often, for Ruth was left more to herself than ever before.

Ever since man loved woman and woman loved man have the woodland paths and shades and thickets been consecrated to lovers' vows and lovers' woes. Municipal corporations may provide public parks and gardens and libraries, and swimming-baths to the end of the chapter, and yet fail to secure perfectly equipped towns. In the future, when only the idealistic will meet the every-day requirements of our exceedingly nice great-great-grandchildren, the ideal town will be built, and no other kind of town. And the ideal town will be fringed about with a great green wood, wherein lovers, and they only, may enter and swear those idealistic vows which, let us hope, will entail only an idealistic damnation. At Voe there was plenty of woodland, and here our disconsolate pair often met. Sometimes, Silas being out of the way, they would meet at Violet Chalk's picturesque cottage on the margin of the rolling uplands. More often still, Abel would run up the steep, sandy lane to the cottage and send word to Ruth, by Violet, when and where they would next meet.

The two lovers were thoroughly unhappy and most delightfully happy; a contradiction which love makes light of, and none will quarrel at, save sere maidens and surly, churly bachelors. They were so sweetly melancholy, so wretchedly happy, that they almost forgot the existence of Am Ende. But Am Ende never forgot them, and seldom lost sight of them long together. He made his weekly reports to the miller, who, however, took no steps to prevent these frequent lovers' meetings. At length a strange rumor began to spread through Voe, in a kind of subterranean manner. Nobody knew who originated it, or how true it was; but those were little points of mystery that only made it the more piquant. It was scandalous, and so was tasted and enjoyed *à la sourdine*. And this was the sinister rumor: "There was summat up atwixt Abel Boden and Violet Chalk! My stars, if Silas on'y knowed!"

CHAPTER XXXI

ON THE STONE TERRACE

THE miller attributed Kneebone's delay in beginning operations at the mine to his being busy with another bit of his tomfoolery. By which phrase the miller indicated his opinion of the Memorial Hall scheme. As may be readily divined, this was not Kneebone's reason for delay, though he made no scruple of accepting it as such, when it was gratuitously offered to him by the inquisitive natives. In the course of his varied career, Kneebone had acquired the useful talent of letting inquisitive people inform him concerning his own private plans and purposes. Acquiescence in popular rumor was a valuable art, he thought. It saved one the trouble of explaining one's self, when others did it at their own expense; moreover, it avoided the friction between good friends that was frequently generated by personal denial and explanation. The desire to be always rightly understood and never misrepresented by one's curious neighbors far and near, Kneebone thought, was a very parochial and untravelled form of egotism; and remembering how prosaic life is to most neighbors far and near, he held it to be an act of benevolence to contribute something in his own person to the ever meagre stock of local romance. He took kindly to that saying of Lamb's: "Truth is precious, and is not to be wasted on everybody."

So it came to pass that all Voe knew that Christopher Kneebone put off his odd venture in the mine simply because he was up to his ears in work on the beautiful structure that was going to be the pride and boast of the village. That venture of his in the mine was an odd thing, to be sure—a thing concerning which, like Sir Roger, they held there was something to be said on both sides. The miller, who was a knowing man, was dead against it; he declared it to be at the best nothing but "tomfoolery," and at the worst it was—unquotable.

But it was not for the Voese to side against the man who was doing for Voe what Kneebone was doing; besides which, the subject was juicy and fresh, and could afford to await fit and proper discussion at a future time. For the present, they found sufficient interest in watching the making of the foundation,

and the slow uprising of the walls, and the gradual assumption of shape and style in the building that was already "our Hall." Scarcely a day went by but what Miss Janoca Phythian came down to see how things were getting along; she might have been building it herself, from the way in which she managed everything and everybody. Kneebone was nowhere beside her, but seemed to wait her good-will and pleasure at every turn; a clever, capable woman was Miss Janoca Phythian, as any one with half an eye could see, and a born lady to boot. Voe was delighted, for it had an almost superstitious reverence for her ability and sound judgment. Need it be said that the extinguished man, Christopher Kneebone, was also delighted? For the pleasure of seeing her daily, of watching her gracious ways, of listening to her sweet and cultivated voice, of getting one of her frank, free, steady looks, as she turned her dark and glorious eyes upon him—for this it was a bliss to be—extinguished. Rather than lose it all, he was prepared to go on building memorial halls forever.

Balthasar Phythian watched the movement of events with placid satisfaction; he used his eyes and ears well, and made little use of his tongue. Words were dangerous things, and the fewer used the better, especially at a time when a few heedless syllables might bring about his ears in ruins the pretty, fantastic structure which, he persuaded himself, he beheld growing into existence day by day, like a fair temple built by magic rather than by art or man's device. At any rate, so long as Jano's mind was otherwise occupied, there was a fair chance that she would not turn her attention to the dreadful subject of getting him a wife. Full of serene guile and subtile hope, Balthasar was plastic as clay and pliant as a willow. A most delightful brother, he lived apparently to make everything easy and smooth for his stately sister, whom he humored and waited upon with such thoroughbred and all-round gallantry and devotion as might very well have bred suspicion as to its motive, in these days of inferior manners among superior people.

But Janoca had a large and open nature, in which it was difficult for any mean suspicion to find a lurking-place. She accepted the fine devotion of her brother as it had been a bit of exquisite commonplace, as wonted as it was fit and proper. And somehow this gracious indifference, this seeming sweet familiarity with what was really an innovation in conduct, impressed Balthasar as being a kind of courtly compliment and flattery worthy of a queen. It seemed a royal way of saying: "Blood will tell. Now you are true to your nature, O Balthasar!"

On those days when Janoca was unable to go down to Voe, Balthasar would be sure to say to Kneebone: "We shall hope to see you at the Chase to-night. Be sure and bring the plans with you." Thus it came about that Christopher Kneebone was frequently to be found at Carbel Chase. He soon discovered, indeed, that it was not always convenient and never absolutely necessary to wait for an invitation. Ideas frequently occurred to him which he thought it wiser to impart to Janoca without delay. It was singular what a variety of ideas occurred to him; his mental activity was surprising. This kind of cargo he generally unloaded early in the afternoon.

One day in the beginning of August Kneebone was at the Chase, freighted with ideas as usual. Deep peace had settled upon Balthasar in his arm-chair. Janoca, however, was wide awake, and her face and eyes were unusually animated—perhaps she was conscious of Kneebone's eyes, which to-day met hers with strange new meanings in them; they seemed, indeed, to have become speaking organs full of moving eloquence. Kneebone was on the point of leaving, when Balthasar opened his eyes and said:

"You are not going, are you?"

"Yes."

"I thought we were going to Carkloe Manor?"

"To-day?"

"Yes. It is a beautiful day, and I have had a glorious siesta—I sank twenty fathoms deep in sleep in twenty seconds. I felt the dark, soft billows roll over me. Ah me! if death is only like that! Let us go. I feel in a pensive mood."

"Are you quite awake, brother?" inquired Janoca.

"Yes; at least I think so. Still I am pensive all the same, and my poor spirit yearns for the melancholy of the old yew garden at the manor. Jano, speak the word!"

Janoca looked at Kneebone, and Kneebone looked at Janoca.

"I think we may as well go," she said, in as judicial a tone as she could assume, while a most unjudicial blush rose and fell, like a sudden tidal wave on the beautiful shore of some mysterious sea of lovely color.

The Carkloe Manor estate adjoined that of Carbel Chase, but the house was about three miles from the Chase. A foot-path through fields and woods and rocky dells ran from park to park. The manor-house, which dated from the middle of the sixteenth century, stood on high ground five and a half miles from the nearest station, and consequently out of the beat of the ordinary tourist. Yet its fame was sufficiently great to attract scores during the year to visit it; they had to hire con-

veyances at Yewdle Brig and pay for them, but nobody was ever heard to say upon returning that they had not had their money's worth. The place had, of course, a history of its own: it made no pretensions, for a wonder, of having sheltered either Mary Queen of Scots or the Merry Monarch in the evil days; but it had stood a couple of sieges at the hands of the Parliamentarians, and one by the Royalists. The ubiquitous Oliver had first bombarded it and afterward slept in it. Every year, at midnight on the 5th of October, up from the old lake in the park rose a gray horse, which whinnied and neighed under a venerable oak that grew hard by, and then without sound of hoof went like the wind toward the Lady's Wood, until its form was lost to view in the white mists of the valley. Nobody believes in ghosts nowadays, but catch a dweller in those parts crossing Carkloe Park on the fifth night in October, if you can! With its turrets and battlements, loop-holes, gargoyles, and projecting leaden spouts, its fine archways and flag-paved court-yard, the manor looked what in truth it was, a diminutive castle. Seeing workmen about and scaffolding up, Kneebone said, as they drew near:

"What is going on? Are they renovating it?"

"It looks like it, and I expect it needs it. You know the owner has only just come of age; no one but the bailiff and his family has lived in it for a long while—twelve or fifteen years, I should think," remarked Balthasar.

"Is Mr. Stroud himself coming to reside here?" asked Janoca.

"I suppose so. I heard he wanted to sell the estate and go abroad to live, some time ago. I expect he has given up the idea, from the look of it."

"Couldn't find a customer probably," suggested Kneebone.

"Probably. It is a large estate—three thousand acres or more. Purchasers of that calibre are not easily found, and when found, difficult to please."

"Why does not Messrs. Job Else & Company purchase it?" said Janoca, laughing lightly as she looked at Kneebone.

"Do you wish to know?" he inquired.

"Certainly."

"In the first place, I should say he was too late now. Then, it would take a pile of money. Again, it is a picturesque old place, but, for a lone man, rather big. Above all, how would it sound—Abel Boden, sometime Squire Saxton's head shepherd, now master of Carkloe Manor! Don't you think the world would laugh, Miss Phythian?"

"Why should it? Some few of us may be fortunate enough to have had grandfathers; but *we* should not laugh. The

laughters would only be those who have made recent genealogical discoveries, and whose arms are as new as their plate. Let them laugh. We with grandfathers should perhaps smile among ourselves, but you would not see us. And really, what would be the use of having had a grandfather, if we may not smile good-naturedly at a man who ought to have had one?"

This saying, thought Kneebone, sounded sweet in the sweetly proud mouth of Janoca Phythian. They crossed a very narrow stone arch, that once spanned the moat that was still distinctly traceable in outline, and entered the court-yard.

"I am going to leave you now. When you want me you will find me in the garden, sitting on the stone bench under the old yew-tree, or walking with meditative steps along the terrace," said Balthasar, and straightway he disappeared through a low doorway.

Kneebone was not at all sorry to see him go, but a shade of vexation swept across the face of Janoca.

"Do you know your way about?" asked Kneebone of his companion.

"Oh, yes; I have been here frequently," she answered.

Kneebone turned to the bailiff's daughter, who stood ready to show them over the place, and said:

"Then I don't think we shall need your services." He slipped a coin into her hand, and she left them.

"I am afraid you have done an unwise thing. I cannot rattle off the history of the place nearly so well as she can. There is something worth noting in nearly every room," observed Janoca.

"I don't like those talking parrots. I would rather trust to my eyes. Where shall we begin?"

"Oh, at the cellars, the crypt, and the kitchens, of course."

They started and went through the whole pile. In almost every room there were men busily at work.

"They are a frightful nuisance. In a place like this one expects to encounter the concentrated quietude of centuries, not the bustle of a modern workshop," exclaimed Kneebone, with a touch of impatience.

Janoca laughed sweetly and said: "But the man who is going to live here is not a patriarch. He is a modern man, and evidently desires modern surroundings. And after all, I think he deserves a lot of credit for his good taste."

"You think so?"

"Certainly. Is not this very room a proof of his taste?" They were standing in the drawing-room, a long apartment covered with exquisite panel-work. Kneebone assumed a crit-

ical air, surveyed the place for some time in silence, and finally remarked:

"I guess it might be made a real elegant apartment."

"I should call that the dialect of Chicago, not of Boston or New York," laughed Janoca.

"You are right. Boston would call it 'an awfully pretty place.'"

"And Boston would be right. It is going to be lovely when it is finished. And that fireplace—O Mr. Kneebone, what I would give for a fireplace like that!"

"Do you like that old leaded window there, filling up the entire end of the room?"

"Please do not talk in that barbaric tone. One would think you would like to destroy one of the most charming features of the room. Yet I think, if it were my place, I should make one alteration."

"Indeed! what is that?" asked Kneebone, with great interest.

"I think the room is a little dark. It is too long to be lighted by one window only."

"Where would you put another one?"

"At the other end, which would command a beautiful view of the park."

"Then it shall be done," said Kneebone, with such gravity that Janoca burst into a merry peal of laughter.

With the decoration of the lofty vaulted dining-room Janoca was delighted, as well she may have been, seeing that the bare gray panels were being covered with large cartoons splendidly executed. Presently they entered the ball-room two sides of which were given up to windows, the others to richly carved woodwork. All this elaborate carving was being carefully hidden from sight by a series of remarkably handsome book-cases in red cedar. Janoca raised her hands in horror, exclaiming:

"O the barbarian!"

"Nay, don't say that. It is the best touch about the place. The man is fond of books," pleaded Kneebone.

"And he must go and filch the ball-room for a bookstall! Hide that lovely carving with colored cloths and sheepskins! Oh, it is wicked!"

"But it is the only room in the house that could be spared. No room is too good for books. I count them almost sacred things."

"He never reads them, I am sure. If he did, they would have humanized him, and made him incapable of such an outrage. The truth is, he has a club-foot and cannot dance, and this is his revenge!"

"But where would you have him go with his books?"

"Go, sir! Why, into the crypt!"

"Say the cellar at once."

"The cellar? Oh, dear, no. The wine would be there. And an idle student in a wine-cellar would never do."

"Then what would you have done here, pray?"

"First of all, these hideous——"

"Now come, be fair. They are very handsome cases, and must have cost a lot of money."

"Granted. In their proper place I really think I should greatly admire them, but here they are an eyesore. Those out of the way, I would have the room finished in white and gold; and in those plain panels, I would have Watteau designs done by a master; and the ceiling—oh, I do not quite know. I will think about that, and let you know."

"Thank you. It shall be as you wish," said Kneebone, and again his gravity made Janoca laugh.

By and by they went out of doors, and following a laurel-hedged path, came at length on to a stone terrace overlooking a grass-plot, with a fountain and a statue in the centre, and surrounded by ancient yew-trees. Balthasar Phythian sat on a stone bench under the shadow of one of the trees. The tender antique melancholy of the spot touched a deep chord in his nature.

"Dear fellow! he is perfectly happy now," murmured Janoca, lovingly.

"Yet I do not envy him," said Kneebone, in a low voice.

"I thought the happy were always to be envied? Why do you not envy him?"

"Because I should not care ever again to be happy without—you by my side."

How the color burned in her face as she said, with a little nervous laugh:

"You men are always saying foolish things just when we expect you to speak wise ones!"

CHAPTER XXXII

A LOVER AND HIS LASS

THE miller was away from home, and was not expected back for some hours. The day had been unusually close and sultry even for August; but as the sun began to dip toward the tops of the hills, a cool breeze sprang up and murmured softly among the pines that embowered the mill. Ruth came to the front door, and stood with her hands clasped behind her. Her eyes were on the hay-ricks, but her thoughts were with her lover. Suddenly the girl's face brightened, as Violet Chalk came up the lane and into the cobble-paved yard.

"I am so glad you have come. I have been by myself all day, and I think I was feeling lonely," exclaimed Ruth, as Violet Chalk drew near.

"You are sure it was me you wanted to see, Miss Ruth? Me alone, whether I brought a message or not?" queried Violet Chalk, with a merry laugh, and a roguish twinkle in her eyes.

"Yes, you alone; but have you—brought anything, Violet?"

"Ah, but it's a pretty thing to blush like that. But happen you'll blush hotter than that ere the night's out, when somebody——"

"Violet! You are forgetting yourself, surely."

"There's no harm done, I should hope, in kissing one's lover. Oh, if my man Silas was only as handsome as I know who, I'd smother him with kisses! Yes, I've got a message. He wants you to meet him in the fir ring, on the way to Black Rocks, at half-past eight. And you've got no time to lose either, Miss Ruth."

"I don't like that way; it is so lonely."

"Happen that is why he chose it."

"And I nearly always take the wrong path."

"If you like, I will go with you as far as the old gamekeeper's cottage. I know the path well enough—not that I ever went a-courting along it. If I could only have my courting days over again, wouldn't I——" But Ruth had thrust her fingers into her ears and rushed into the house.

Violet Chalk stood for some moments in profound meditation, then a smile broke over her face as she remarked to herself aloud: "Yes, it is a good thing girls don't know everything." And on this bit of wisdom her mind seemed to rest with satisfaction. In a little while Ruth reappeared, wearing a cream-colored dress, a broad-brimmed hat, knots of blue ribbon; she carried a stick in one hand, and a little quaint shawl of brown silk in the other.

"Shall you be warm enough, Miss Ruth? I brought my cloak with me, for I thought we were going to have a shower."

Ruth glanced at the warm blue sky, that was quite cloudless, and said:

"Yes, I shall be warm enough with this shawl. I almost wish it would rain, just to cool the air; but there is not much sign of it now."

They set out for their walk. A few minutes later, Am Ende came out of the mill and followed them down the lane. Ruth and her companion crossed some meadows, and entered a wood known as the King's Lot, which covered the slopes of a lofty hill; they followed a grass-covered footpath that ran up the hill with many curious windings, until they came to a point where the path branched out in four or five directions.

"There, I knew it would be so!" exclaimed Ruth, as Violet Chalk proceeded along one of the paths. "If you had not come with me, I should certainly have taken the road to the right."

"You can always tell the way by those two firs there; the one old and dark and grim-looking, and the other young and nice-looking and light green, you see. Two years ago I christened them father and daughter; now I call them miller and daughter. And for keeping you in the right path, Miss Ruth, trust Violet Chalk!"

"You always were conceited, Violet. I suppose it helps you to keep up your gay spirits and your good looks."

Violet Chalk laughed at this sally.

"As I was about to say a minute ago, if I was you, Miss Ruth, if somebody asked me to make a runaway marriage with him, I should say: 'Oh, whistle, and I'll come to you, my lad.' And when he whistled, I should go to him, miller or no miller," she said, with no little earnestness.

"I wonder what in the world you will say next! And that is what you call 'keeping me in the right path,' is it?" answered Ruth, laughing, while the color burned in her face.

"Yes, it is. The miller will live for another ten years at least. Do you think he will ever give his consent? And are

you two going to wait till you are gray before you wed? You would be——”

“Will you allow me to remark, Violet, that I am not so old as you seem to think I am—though perhaps I am wiser than you give me credit for? It will take more than ten years, madam, to turn my hair even to the suspicious shade of your own!”

“My hair turning gray! Oh, what a wicked slander! It is exactly the color of your own, Miss Ruth, just as we are both of the same height and build. Gray, indeed! When my hair turns, it will be into a lovely golden. I wish I could persuade you two to be sensible, and take the bull by the horns. If you don’t——”

“I have just felt a spot of rain, and another. Just look at that cloud behind us.”

“Yes, we shall have a shower. We had better run for the gamekeeper’s cottage. You would be wet through in no time, Miss Ruth.”

They set off at a run, and in a couple of minutes reached the little ivy-clad ruin that stood in a clearing, and about which the rabbits played at feeding-time. They had barely entered this half-unroofed cottage when a flash of lightning was seen, followed by a clap of thunder that startled a bat that flew out for a few moments, wheeled about in an eccentric fashion, and then came back through the doorway and hid itself under the ivy on the wall. Then the rain fell, at first in big angry drops, and then in the steady, business-like way familiar to hill-and-dale folk. There was no more thunder and lightning, but the minutes flew by and it was still raining; the rain was light now, but wetting.

“He will guess you were on your way, and he will be waiting for you. If you don’t want him to get wet through, you had better take my cloak, and run to the fir-grove and bring him here. It won’t take you more than a couple of minutes to get there. Or shall I go for you?” Ruth preferred to go herself, and said so. “And won’t you put on my bonnet, too, Miss Ruth? Your pretty hat would get spoiled.” Ruth accepted, with thanks. “There now, you might be mistaken for me. And you’ll see, he will kiss you all the same, and happen without troubling to look and see which of us it is! He’s only a man, and I know——”

She ended with a merry laugh, for Ruth had run away from her, and was now tripping gracefully along beneath the overhanging trees, looking remarkably like Violet Chalk, save that her carriage was peculiarly her own. A few hundred yards

brought her to the ring of fir-trees. She entered the open space between the trees, and glanced round; there was no one there. She stood irresolute, wondering if her lover had been and gone, and was on the point of returning to the ruined cottage, when Abel suddenly appeared a short distance away, standing between two large rocks. He came forward with a bound, and took her in his arms.

"I have been keeping dry in there. Are you wet? I thought it was Violet Chalk come to say you couldn't come," he said, as he kissed her in lover-like fashion.

"I am not at all wet. Violet came with me to show me the road. We sheltered in the old cottage; and she lent me her cloak and bonnet. You won't ever mistake her for me, though, will you?" said Ruth, archly.

"Not much fear, though they say all cats are gray in the dark," laughed Abel.

"You had better not look at cats in the dark, then. Hadn't we better go back to the cottage? She will be expecting us; and it is still raining a little."

"I don't think it would be wise for you to stand long in your damp things; but we won't go just yet, darling. I want to have you all to myself for a while," said Abel.

He stood just inside the circle against a tree, and as he spoke he put his arms beneath her cloak and round her waist, and drew her close to him. Ruth, nothing loath to be loved, yielded. The minutes flew by unheeded; not so the thousand-and-one love-touches, love-words, love-looks, love-vows. These were all subtle filaments that went to the making of the great chord of love, ever mysterious and ever sacred, wherewith their two lives were bound together for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in health and in sickness, until death them should part. Their nerves tingled, their blood burned, their hearts were full and their spirits happy. The divine list of sex and the sweet ache of soul—both good in the eyes of God—were blent inextricably into the holy passion of human love. In this, the one mood in which mortals lay hold of the eternal element in life, what wonder that the two lovers lost all sense of time? Suddenly, however, the lost sense was restored, and Ruth disengaged herself from her lover's arm with a quick movement.

"We must go now, love."

"Very well. You are not cold, sweetheart?" Ruth gave a little laugh full of sweet meaning, and glancing at Abel, shook her head at him in a pretty, coquettish way.

On reaching the cottage they found Violet Chalk sitting on

a large stone—fast asleep! When she awoke, Abel and Ruth were standing near the entrance, talking in a low voice.

"Ah, there is nothing like a good conscience to sleep on. I was just dreaming about you two when you came in," said Violet Chalk, rising.

"When we came in? We have been here ten minutes or more; have we not, Abel?" exclaimed Ruth, laughing.

"I didn't say anything to the contrary, Miss Ruth. I wasn't going to wake until I had finished my dream. It was such a nice one. I heard the bells pealing, and Miss Ruth there was all in white, with orange-blossoms and——"

"All right, Violet; let me imagine the rest, till the happy day comes. We must be going now," said Abel, for Ruth's sake.

Violet Chalk made no reply, only tossed her head in mock anger. On the edge of the wood, near the meadows, Abel left them; and then only would Violet Chalk allow Ruth to dispense with her warm cloak. Arrived at the mill, they found that the miller had just reached home. He seemed in a wonderfully good temper, and made no remark about Ruth having been out so late. Violet Chalk soon left, and Ruth busied herself with getting her father a nice supper. Toward the close of the meal, Jane, the domestic, appeared and said:

"Please, sir, Am Ende wants to see you."

"Very well. I'll see him presently," said the miller.

She did not know why, but Ruth shivered when she heard the name of Am Ende.

CHAPTER XXXIII

IN A TRAP

ONLY on rare occasions, and at long intervals, did Miller Boden honor with his presence the pretty cottage on the edge of the upland, where dwelt Mistress Violet Chalk. It was with no little surprise, therefore, that Violet Chalk beheld the miller coming along the garden-walk on the afternoon of the day following her stroll with Ruth to the fir ring. Her person was always neat, and her home was always bright as a new button and sweet as a nosegay; so she had no fear on either of these scores. Yet, oddly enough, she felt a most unusual and unaccountable sensation of fear. Nevertheless, she put on a smiling face, and met her former master at the door with a welcome.

"It is quite a tug up the lane on a day like this," said the miller, as he entered the bright little living-room, and, sinking into Silas' arm-chair, mopped his large red face with an antique-looking yellow and red pear-patterned handkerchief.

"Shall I get you a glass of beer, sir?" asked Violet Chalk, thinking to herself that the miller was in a wonderfully good humor, and racking her brain to discover the probable object of his visit.

"Well, I don't mind if I do. I know your man keeps a good tap," he said, in his best manner.

The woman brought him the beer, which he held in his hand and drank slowly, dwelling at length on the merits of the various local beers; then he had a hundred questions to ask Violet Chalk on household matters, and when he had exhausted them he fell back upon her kitchen-garden, and talked vegetables for a solid half-hour. And meanwhile he was good-tempered and almost jolly; once or twice he laughed heartily—a thing which Violet Chalk had not known to happen for a good dozen years. This puzzled the woman greatly, and her curiosity became burning. She was sewing, but soon her excitement got into her fingers, and she put her work down on her lap. Just then the miller asked:

"Where's Silas?"

"He is out. I don't look for him back till tea-time."

"Which is at what time?"

"Five o'clock."

"That's an hour and forty minutes off," said the miller, glancing at the old slow-ticking clock in the corner near to the gun-rack.

"Yes. Did you want to see him?"

"Oh, dear, no. Do you expect any visitor this afternoon?"

Was his tone really sly? Had he been drinking? She answered no to the second question and yes to the first. She was angry with herself, but she could not help it; the blood was hot in her face.

"Not that I know of. Why do you ask?" she said, with a touch of defiance.

"Because I've got something serious to say. And I didn't want to be broken in upon while saying it," answered the miller, with a sudden change of tone and manner that was enough to startle any ordinary set of nerves. It thoroughly startled Violet Chalk. Her brown eyes opened wide, and she made a movement as if to rise. "Nay, sit still and hear it out. Happen at the end a bit of a walk will do you good," said the miller, with blunt irony.

The woman made no reply, but sat perfectly still. The miller leaned forward in his chair, resting both hands on the top of his stout oak stick, and looking her full in the face, said:

"I little thought, Violet Chalk, that I should ever live to hear this kind of talk about you. When you looked after my girl Ruth, and kept house for me, you were an honest woman. And now——"

"And now—what?" said Violet Chalk, quickly, her eyes flashing.

"Now you are—not."

"Indeed! that's news. And so that's the meaning of your fit of good temper, is it? Oh, if I was only a man, or you a woman!" She spoke almost in a whisper, but the effect outstripped any noise.

"It is of no use beginning that game with me. I don't come here on a fool's errand, nor am I like to be sent away by a fool's bluster. I suppose you know that your name is in every mouth in the village, don't you?"

"I know nothing at all about it. If they like my name, let them speak it." Her anger was still bubbling up, though a dreadful terror was creeping upon her.

"They do speak it, and have been speaking it now for weeks, in a lighter way than an honest woman would care for."

"Mr. Boden, you are Miss Ruth's father, and for a good many years you was my master, and I wouldn't like to forget my duty to you. But if you won't stop that talk about me being no longer an honest woman, I'll ask you, sir, to please to leave my husband's house. I would have got the poker to any other man, and ordered him off for a blackguardly liar!"

This was plain English, and the miller blinked at it. He pulled out his aggressive handkerchief and blew his nose vigorously. The woman, who knew the man perfectly, saw that she had scored a point, and shrewdly thought it would not be bad generalship to follow up the momentary advantage with a blow that might possibly rout the already demoralized foe. So she added:

"And to think that you, Miller Boden, of all men, should be the one to dabble in scandalous reports and nasty gossip! Them as live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. I mind me of the time when folks had your name, too, in their mouths. It's a good many years since last I heard it, I'll allow; but when people have once talked of a man as a murderer, they remember it to their dying day."

For some moments glared the miller at her in silence, then he scratched his lower lip that was smarting keenly; the dangerous expression of his eyes died away, and he gave vent to an ironical grunt.

"You are a silly, babbling idiot, no more and no less. Now listen to me. Young Boden, the blacksmith, has been coming here pretty often of late. They've coupled your names together for some time now. I should like to know what brings him here?"

"That's none of your business, that I know of," replied Violet Chalk, but her heart trembled.

"All right; let it stand at that. He never comes when Silas is about—perhaps I shouldn't under the same circumstances."

"It is false."

"Say incorrect, Violet, and I'll agree with you. Sometimes Silas is in when he comes, and then—he comes bravely up like a man, and he and Silas have a friendly pipe and a glass together, eh? Is that it? Not quite. When Silas is at home there's a little signal kept flying—you see I know all about it: an upstairs blind on brass rods is partly drawn aside. Then the modest young man goes his way, and does not intrude upon your domestic bliss. Yes, one at a time is not a bad rule."

"Well, I won't lie about it. Suppose he has come as you say: it's only been a few times, and he has come on honest business, and——"

"Honest business! When he comes on signal, and avoids your husband! Come, I might be a schoolboy. Anyhow, his business is so honest that it is not to be spoken, it seems."

Violet Chalk hung her head, not for shame, for she had nothing to be ashamed of, but in perplexity. She felt she was in a trap, and how to get out of it she could not see, without disloyalty to Ruth. It was not in her to betray Ruth. Said the miller, after a pause:

"The nuisance is, with you women, when once you begin going to the dogs you can't go fast enough to please you. Take last night, for instance. You must actually go and make an appointment with the modest, the good, the honorable young man to meet him in the woods."

"It is a vile lie. I did nothing of the kind."

"You mean to say you didn't meet Abel Boden last night in the woods?"

"No, I did not—not by appointment, not in your sense."

The miller laughed.

"Still you met him?"

"Yes, I saw him. But I hadn't expected to see him, and I'm very sure he didn't expect to see me."

"Ha! these delightful surprises! Funny how they should come about, isn't it? It was all a surprise that you found yourself in the fir ring!"

"I wasn't near the fir ring last night."

"It was all a surprise that you found yourself in his arms, and lay there while he kissed you as if he had been—Silas!"

Violet Chalk shuddered. She saw a dreadful issue only to all this. Yet her tongue was sealed. Continued the miller, artfully:

"I've bethought me that happen you would say that somebody else was mixed up in all this?"

"And if so, do you think I'd be mean enough to betray them? What I have done, I have done, and I'll stand by."

"Well, stick to that; I've no objection. Anything else would take a deal of proving—leastways to me, and, I'm thinking, to your man as well. Now, what are you going to do about it all?"

"First, I shall mind my own business; and next, I shall tell such as meddle with mine to mind theirs," answered Violet Chalk, bravely enough to the ear.

The miller scratched his head, and reflected awhile. Presently he said:

"If this comes out you are a ruined woman."

"I thought you said it was out?"

"Well, yes, it is out this much—everybody's coupling your name with the smith's. The gossip is out, but not the proof," explained the miller.

"Proof? How can you prove what is false?" demanded the woman. The miller smiled.

"In the mouth of two or three witnesses a thing shall be established. There are more than that prepared to make oath that I know on. I've got hold of every one of them, and it rests with me whether they forget all about it or whether they spread it all abroad. I ask you again, what are you going to do about it?"

"O master, why are you so cruel? Do you want to ruin me?" cried Violet Chalk, reproachfully.

"No, my wench. I want to save you, or I shouldn't be here now."

"Does Silas know aught about it?"

"Well, is it likely, do you think? Has he said anything to you about it?"

"No, no! If he knew he'd kill me."

"That's what I said to myself. He's such a surly, pig-headed, jealous fool, that he wouldn't believe you if you were as innocent as a baby; and you are not that, quite. It rests with yourself whether he knows or not."

"Oh, please, don't let him know! He'd swear I was guilty—and I'm not, master; as I hope to be saved at the last, I done nothing to wrong him. Happen, if I up and told him all afore he's heard anything outside, he would believe me, don't you think?"

At this the miller's countenance assumed an odd expression, while he said: "Maybe he would, but it's uncertain. But one thing is sure: if he once knew what I know he wouldn't believe a word you said, not if you got down on your knees and swore it on the Bible."

"You wouldn't tell him, surely?"

"That depends. If you will fall in with my plan, he need never know a word about it. But if you don't—ere the night is out Silas Chalk will know everything. And then may God have mercy on your soul!"

"O master, master! spare me, spare me! Don't go and ruin me, and break up my home! He'll turn me out, if he doesn't murder me. I served you well for many a long year; and Miss Ruthie, I love the ground she treads on. Have pity, master!" She was on her knees before him, so great was her terror, so dire and woful seemed her impending fate. The miller's heart was hard as his own mill-stones.

"There's no call for this fuss, if you will do what I want you. If you won't, I'd advise you to go and jump into the Scarthin. Will you listen to what I've got to say?"

"Yes, yes!" moaned the woman.

"Then get up and sit down. I can't talk to a woman saying her prayers!"

She rose and seated herself in her chair. Said the miller:

"All I want you to do is to give up and get rid of this honorable young blacksmith. He must leave Voe, and put ten miles atwixt his workshop and my mill. That's all there is to it, and I'll give him a week from to-day to clear out. Get him away, and everything shall be hushed up. But if he isn't out of Voe in seven days Silas Chalk and all Voe shall know what I know. I'll make it too warm for either of you two to walk through Voe, or my name isn't Luke Boden!" With this he got on his feet, and left the cottage without another word.

It was close on midnight, and Christopher Kneebone was seated in a low arm-chair in the little cozy library at Rook's Nest. His pipe was out, his glass of toddy was nearly finished, he ought to have been in bed half an hour ago, but he was held captive by a singular and astonishing book on Mexico, written by a Frenchman. The adventure in which he was absorbed carried over into several chapters, and Kneebone felt that he must go through with it at once, if he hoped to have a good night's rest. Suddenly there was a step on the little gravelled terrace outside, and a knock at the door. Kneebone, much wondering who his visitor could be at that unearthly hour, got up and went to the door. "Who's there?" he inquired, unfastening the door.

"Me," answered a voice that startled him. He opened the door quickly, and there stood Abel Boden.

"Good heavens, lad! are you ill?" cried Kneebone, closing the door as Abel passed in.

"No, I am all right, thank you."

"Then what the deuce brings you here this time of the night? Is there anything the matter with Nathan?"

"No, he is all right. I'm sorry to disturb you so late, but the truth is—I felt I couldn't rest till morning without seeing you."

"Oh, it's all right. The wonder is I wasn't in bed, though," said Kneebone. He poked up the fire and put the little brass kettle on, and fetching another tumbler, brewed his visitor a glass of grog. "Now be good enough to amuse yourself with that, while I finish this chapter. I've only two or three pages to read, but you came in at a very critical point. There's

a fellow pommelling a villain of a priest, and—the thing's too rich not to finish. I wish I had been there at the time!" So saying, Kneebone plunged with glorious appetite into his romantic narrative.

Abel sipped his grog and stared at the fire, and began wondering why romance, like miracle, was a thing that always happened at a distance, and never came home to roost; then his thoughts got into a certain well-worn groove that ran round and round the central image of his love—and time for him was no more. He was recalled to his actual situation by Kneebone closing his book and saying:

"The writer says it is true, which is a good lie, but not so good as the tale itself. Now, my lad, what's up?"

Said Abel: "Violet Chalk came to see me at Nathan's tonight, and I have just seen her back home. She is sorely troubled; and so, for the matter of that, am I. There's a nasty piece of business afloat, it seems."

"Then in that case, hold on a bit while I fill my pipe. Pity you don't smoke oftener, lad. Beastly habit, I know, but good for the intellects; clears away the fog that naturally encumbereth the brain, imparteth serenity to the mind and courage to the heart. In all great undertakings men ought to pray beforehand, but some can't. These ought always to smoke, and the others also," observed Kneebone, filling his pipe as he spoke.

Abel waited until the smoke began to curl and Kneebone lay back in his chair. Then he said abruptly:

"I have got to leave Voe within a week."

"What's that?" exclaimed Kneebone, quickly.

"I always felt it would come sooner or later. He has been driving at it for a long time now, and at last he has got a purchase," said Abel, in a dejected tone.

"You are a fatalist, I hear, by your tone. I have not the smallest idea what you are talking about. But I hate talking with a fatalist, lad. When bad luck has overtaken me—and a devilish hard rider is bad luck—instead of holding out my wrists for him to quietly handcuff me, I've met him, so to speak, with one straight from the shoulder. If that wasn't enough, I never was above using my boot on him. I'm a fatalist to this degree: if you fight the devil of ill luck tooth and nail he is dead sure to turn tail. Now put on a little more cheerful tone, and go ahead. Only don't forget to begin at the beginning."

Profiting by these admirable suggestions, Abel dropped his fatalistic sentiments, adopted a more cheerful tone, and began at the beginning. Kneebone made no remark, except now and

then to put a question, but lay back, puffing slowly, while Abel opened up to him the situation in all its bearings. When he had finished, Kneebone remarked:

"I was afraid some mischief would be the result of these stolen interviews. I think I warned you to keep your eyes open?" Abel made a gesture of impatience. "I know what you mean, lad. It is easy to be foreseeing after the event. Well, let it pass. What do you think now of a trip to South America?"

"I should be very glad to go—if I could take Ruth along."

"Then take her. I don't object. We could leave her in one of the Indian settlements, while we went into the interior," said Kneebone, laughing.

"If we were only married," sighed Abel.

"Then marry, lad. There are plenty of parsons about; and if you will make a runaway match of it, I'll stand all expenses, and give the bride a pretty wedding present for her good sense."

There was a pause, broken by Abel saying:

"I don't know if she would consent. But if she did, it wouldn't get us out of the difficulty. It would not help Violet Chalk. And she seems to be the one most likely to suffer in this affair. No; she has got into the mess for our sakes, and it is only right I should do anything I can to get her out. But I don't like leaving Voe. And Ruth—it will go hard with her, I'm thinking. I see now why the miller left her so much to herself."

"Ha! if it wasn't for that handsome baggage, that piece of colored Chalk, we'd snap our fingers at the miller as far as you are concerned, lad. But unless you are willing to do a mean thing and throw her overboard, you are both in a trap. The gentleman Am Ende, too—I'm afraid he is not to be am-ended. I should like to pension that scamp; kick him and pension him, the subtle rogue! Don't you think the truth could be drilled into Silas Chalk's head? If we could only get him to see things in the right light, we could still circumvent the miller."

This last point was a critical one, and was discussed at length; the final conclusion being that it was of no use trying to win over to reason such a stupidly jealous churl. The prospect seemed hopeless, and Abel was very dejected. Kneebone put down his pipe, drew a toothpick from his pocket, and fell a-thinking. This for a full half-hour. At length he looked up and said:

"You had better sleep here to-night. To-morrow, I guess I will trot up to the mill and have a talk with the miller. Most animals can be either led or driven."

CHAPTER XXXIV

FATHER AND SON

THE next morning Christopher Kneebone was a long time dressing; indeed, he might have been going to Carbel Chase, so careful was he in his toilet. He was a long time over his breakfast, too; not that he ate much, but he dawdled over the meal, and seemed to find more interest in his thoughts than in his smoked bacon and mumbled eggs. Over his pipe he made a pretence of reading his morning paper; but the leaders seemed pretentiously dull and stale, and the news—foreign and home—was strangely wanting in salt. It had turned eleven of the clock when he laid down his pipe, and prepared for his trot to the mill. Passing the forge, he looked in and found Abel alone.

"I am going to beard the lion in his den, you see, as I promised you. How do I look?" he said, drawing himself up for inspection.

"You look all right, sir," answered Abel, smiling.

"Don't you see anything strange in my appearance? Anything that stamps me as a man of mark?"

"No, I don't. Why?"

Kneebone stretched forth his hand, and declaimed with no little spirit:

"On the other side, Satan, alarmed,
Collecting all his might, dilated stood,
Like Teneriff or Atlas, unremoved:
His stature reached the sky, and on his crest
Sat Horror plumed; nor wanted in his grasp
What seemed both spear and shield."

Here he raised aloft his walking-stick, as a Zulu his assegai when about to hurl it.

"I don't often feel called upon to compare myself with his Serene Darkness, but just now I feel very much like he did, and I did not know but what I looked it. I feel in no small funk. And that, I suppose, is what the poet meant by 'on his crest sat Horror plumed.' If you don't see me again, lad, you may conclude the lion has gobbled me up." Then he turned and left the smithy, and five minutes later was at the mill.

The miller was out, but was expected back every minute; and would Mr. Kneebone come in and wait for him? Kneebone went in, and presently Ruth put in an appearance, tall and graceful, and full of all maidenly sweetness and light. She knew nothing of what had occurred, and little guessed the object of his visit. When she shook hands with him he bent forward and kissed her on the cheek. A most unwarrantable proceeding, but he did it with perfect naturalness, and the girl took it with exquisite frankness. A faint blush just tinged her face, but she looked him in the eyes and smiled sweetly. They talked about people and things, especially the Phythians.

Ruth, not all-unconscious of what she was doing, but still with beautiful sincerity, sang the praise of Janoca—sang it as only a girl can sing the song of admiration, devotion, and love. And Christopher Kneebone listened attentively, and found the song exceedingly sweet and musical.

"And then she is rich, you know."

"I didn't know. But she is none the worse for that, I hope?"

"Oh, dear me, no. I only wish I were rich," cried Ruth, blending laugh and sigh together.

"Well, and if you were, what? What would you do first of all?" Kneebone asked in a sympathetic and interested tone, the strange value of which in dealing with men and women he had long since learned, and held it as a sort of shy, pathetic secret of humanity, to be treated with quite peculiar delicacy and respect.

An odd man was Kneebone, full of quaint, tender, and chivalrous notions: his name smacks of the valley of dry bones rather than of the battle of Hastings; but unearth his pedigree, and, sure as fate, somewhere in the remote past we should come across his true progenitor—a quaint old gentleman of courtly manners, sweet temper, knightly ideals, and saintly thoughts.

"Oh, I would buy a yacht, a beautiful steam yacht," replied Ruth, her bonnie brown eyes dancing with delight at the very thought.

"Why not buy a white elephant at once?"

"Indeed it would be no white elephant, I assure you, Mr. Kneebone. I should cruise in the Mediterranean for months."

"After you had cruised in the Mediterranean for months, what next? Sell your boat for a song, and come home in disgust, eh?"

"Nothing of the kind. I should just start off for—for South America."

"South America, eh? What would your ladyship do there?"

Ruth laughed as she answered: "I am sure I don't know. I suppose I should have company on board. I would invite you, for instance, and Mr. and Miss Phythian, and—yes, I should have to take him, because I know he would like very much to go. I mean Abel. I would land you gentlemen to seek for wourali poison, and serpents, and strange insects, and birds—oh, such wonderful birds! The snow-white egret, the scarlet curlew, the rosy flamingo, the yellow and purple Callo del Rio Negro, and that green and blue solitary, the houtou, and the bird that yelps like a puppy and says, 'Pia-po-o-co,' and the bird that barks like a dog, 'Wow, wow, wow, wow,' and above all, the pretty snow-white campanero, with its note loud and clear like the sound of a distant convent bell, which can be heard at a distance of three miles. These and other curiosities you should seek out. But Miss Phythian should remain on board, where are no cannibals, and I would stay with her. And together we would pray for the safe return of the mad Englishmen."

Kneebone stared at her in astonishment.

"Not a bad programme either. But—excuse me—you seem awfully well posted in the ornithology of South America," he remarked.

"Do I? I am afraid I have said all I know about it. It is what Abel has told me. He has told me such a lot about South America lately. I believe he would like to go and spend a year or two in the dreadful forests there," exclaimed Ruth, gayly.

"Has he said anything to you about a plan I proposed to him a little while back?" inquired Kneebone.

A look of surprise crossed the girl's face as she answered: "No, not a word."

"Come to think of it, it is hardly likely he would. I wanted him to pull up his pegs and go with me to South America. And there find fame and forget—love!"

Ruth looked at him with unutterable reproach; then the tears came into her eyes.

"Oh, that was cruel! I see it all now. And he gave it all up for me!" she murmured in a low voice.

"Yes, my dear, he gave it all up for you. But then, he loves you. And if a fellow doesn't act finely when he is in love, God bless me, he is a wastrel, and nothing will help him but a taste of cowhide! I think it only fair to myself to say that I have made him another offer since," said Kneebone, with a smile.

"As cruel as the other one?"

"You shall judge for yourself. I offered to pay all expenses, start off for South America at once, and give the lady in question a pretty wedding present for her good sense, on condition that he would make a runaway match with you right away."

"O Mr. Kneebone, that was very, very wrong of you! It was almost wicked, in fact," cried Ruth, her face aflame.

"I don't know about that. I am going to have a plain talk about certain matters with your father to-day. If he is unreasonable, I should advise you to be a sensible girl, and——"

Just then a step was heard outside, and Ruth said quickly as she rose:

"That is father. I will go and tell him you are here." Then she left the room. Presently the miller came in, looking surly and aggressive. Kneebone said:

"Good-day, miller. I should like to have a few minutes' private talk with you."

"Then you had better come this way," answered the miller, gruffly. He led the way into the formal parlor, closed the door, and remarked: "You can find a chair, I suppose. I'm ready to hear what you have to say, blacksmith."

There was something distinctly contemptuous in his tone and manner. But it seemed to have no effect upon Kneebone, who smiled and slowly stroked his chestnut beard; he looked round the room as if in search of the most comfortable chair, before he made up his mind to try the end of the sofa. Here he settled himself with great deliberation and purpose of comfort, while the miller sat awkwardly in his arm-chair, with a heavy frown on his face.

"I hear you are disappointed in not getting a lease of the Plateau mine, miller?" said Kneebone, in an interrogative tone, by way of an opening.

"Happen I am—happen I'm not," replied the miller, with blunt curtness.

"I have been so busy lately with one thing and another that I've had no time to do anything at it. There's no reason now, though, why I shouldn't go ahead and open it up. I wonder what I shall find in it."

"What do you mean by that?" inquired the miller, with startling energy.

"God bless my soul! what have I said to vex you? Do you think I should work the thing if I didn't hope to make a find? And a mighty strange one, too. One that will make the old dunces round here open their eyes, or my name isn't what it is."

For some moments the miller glared at him in silence, with

wild and fierce terror unmistakably in his eyes and face. But if Kneebone's tone was ambiguous, his manner was simplicity itself. The miller was reassured, though the shock to his nerves left him almost unstrung. He laughed gruffly as he asked:

"And what may you hope to find?"

"Well, perhaps it will be time enough to talk when I've struck it," answered Kneebone, in the same dreadfully ambiguous tone that sent a cold thrill through the miller. His tone changed pleasantly, as he added: "I don't know but what I'd be willing to transfer my lease—I've got power to do it, you know—for a proper consideration."

"Ha! indeed!" exclaimed the miller, and his face lit up in a trice. What a flood of joy rushed through his frame! But after it ran quick jets of cold caution and calculating prudence. The light died out of his face; he even tried to frown and look surly and indifferent; but somehow his muscles failed him, while every beat of his heart seemed to pump gladness into his remorseful face. The result, as concerned his countenance, was a pitifully odd and tragical play and working of feature and expression. Kneebone beheld in it something abysmally sad and pathetic.

"Yes, I am afraid of having too many irons, for one thing, in the fire. Then, again, if I am to receive a valuable consideration, I must expect to offer something valuable. I think it is a valuable mine either to you or me, and so I offer it you on conditions," he said, slowly, as he watched the strife of emotions distorting his brother's face.

"I'm not so sweet on it, happen, as you think. But that's no reason why I shouldn't hear your conditions," said the miller, cautiously.

"Well, there's that nephew of yours. I have a strong fancy for him, and I hear that you want him to leave the place. May I ask what you have against him?"

"That's none of your business. What's atwixt him and me is atwixt him and me. You served me a scurvy trick enough in not sacking him when first you came. I like a man who'll stick to his word."

"If you mean I have broken mine, I'd be much obliged if you would let me know when, where, and how?"

"Six months ago, on the night of the sale, you gave me to understand you'd sack him."

"Indeed! I didn't know it."

"You said you would think about it."

"I know that. And I kept my word. I thought about it,

and decided I'd keep him. And jolly glad I am that I did. He is a very useful fellow."

"Look here, you blacksmith! I tell you it was a scurvy trick. But I've got him on the hip at last."

"Yes, it does look like it, doesn't it? Poor devil! he seems in a trap, unless somebody can get him out."

"Let them try! that's all I have to say. Ha! ha! let them try! Damn it all, let us drop the subject! What's your price for the mine?"

"I'm thinking if we drop the lad we must drop the mine, too. My notion was, if I let you have the mine, you would agree to drop this affair of Abel and Violet Chalk, and let him and your daughter come together, seeing that they care for one another so much."

The miller made no reply; he seemed powerfully agitated, and found it difficult to control himself. At length he shook his head, and with a short, fierce laugh, he said:

"A nice plan—a very simple, pretty, taking plan! But it won't work, not quite. I'm used to money bargains, not to barter. I'll give you a thousand pounds for the mine. That's a straight offer, and happen I'm a fool for making it; but I'll make it, for all that."

"I won't take it. I put a bigger value on it than that."

"What will you take, then?"

"Nothing in money," answered Kneebone, in a very decided tone. Just then he pulled out a toothpick and put it between his teeth; it was just so that he had done at the sale. The miller noticed the action, and his face clouded. The mine seemed to be slipping from him after all, and the old terror crept over him.

"I'll tell you what I'll do. I will drop this Chalk affair, though it is a beastly scandal, and——"

"Miller," interrupted Kneebone, "just one word—that's all bunkum, and you know it. It serves your purpose; all right, only don't try to fool an old hand like me. I beg pardon, what were you going to say?"

The miller actually flushed at this, and moved uneasily in his chair, as he said: "If it's a false charge, let them prove it. Though I'm thinking your presence here shows that they are in a corner, and they know it; but let that pass. I was saying I'll drop this Chalk affair, and let the young smith alone, if that will satisfy you."

"That is one point settled. Now, what about the young folk coming together?"

"Never! It's out of the question."

"Don't be hasty over it. Listen to reason. He saved her life, and——"

"I tell you I won't hear of it," broke in the miller, angrily.

"Then I will keep the mine, and——"

"Keep it, then, and be d——d to you! No girl of mine shall wed that miserable dog. And the sooner you clear out of here and let him know it the better," cried the miller, rising to his feet. His face was purple, and his whole frame trembled with passion.

And what was the cause of this furious outburst? This: deep down in his heart he was afraid lest his terror at the mine being opened should yet drive him to accept the hated condition of Abel and Ruth coming together! Kneebone was on his feet, but he made no movement to leave. He kept his eyes on the miller, who seemed on the point of making a physical attack upon him.

"There's reason in all things, except in an angry man. What is the use of——"

"Happen I'm master in my own house, and I told you to go. Are you going?" roared the miller.

Kneebone coolly jerked his half-chewed toothpick into the fireplace, and sticking a fresh one between his teeth, replied:

"Well, I am hardly used to this kind of thing. When a blackguard bullies me, indoors or out, I generally like to know the reason why."

With an oath the miller advanced toward Kneebone, his right fist doubled and his left hand outstretched, as if to seize his visitor by the collar or throat, whichever came handiest. Kneebone instantly set himself in scientific attitude for a spar. The miller halted, whereupon Kneebone said:

"How should we look in a photograph? I'm thinking I could knock all the breath out of you in half a minute. And I'm sorely tempted to do it, too, if it's only for the sake of your liver. This is a lively attitude in which to carry on a conversation with a man, and no mistake. But you will remember what I am about to say, to your dying day. Maybe you remember one pretty warm day in May, years ago, carrying a tidy weight up the hillside to the Plateau mine, and pitching it in like a dead dog? Good memory, I see."

There was something fearfully grim and cynical in his last words, for as he spoke the name of the mine the miller gasped: "O my God!" and throwing up his hands, staggered back, and would have fallen but for his high-backed chair, which he suddenly grasped. There he stood, his eyes, wide open with horror, fixed on Kneebone, and his great red face blanched.

"Murder will out, you see," said Kneebone, putting his hands in his trousers-pockets, while he looked the miller steadily in the eye.

"Who are you? A devil from hell, come to torment me afore my time?" asked the miller, in a tone that sent a shiver through Kneebone, for he thought the miller had gone mad.

"No, Luke, maybe I'm sent to save you from going there. Don't you know me?"

"Speak, for God's sake! What do you know? Who are you?" cried the miller, in quick, breathless gasps.

Kneebone crossed the room and came quite close to him; the light was on his face.

"Nay, man, look at me. Take away this nasty scar under the eye, and put this poor crooked, broken nose straight—it was once, you know, Luke, till—never mind when. Look at my eyes. They surely aren't——"

"Thou art Abel, as I live! my brother Abel risen from the dead! And I'm Cain, Cain the cursed. What hast come back for, lad? To hang me?"

"No, lad; that's not in my line. I've come back because I am tired of being away."

"Thou'st been dead o'er twenty years, lad. And I've kept the secret close. But it has burnt me. O God! it has burnt away my soul. I have nothing now worth damning!" The terror had gone from his face now, and he sat down in his chair. An uncanny feeling crept over Kneebone; he did not know whether his brother was mad or not.

"Dead or not, Luke, I'm alive now, and well. You are glad to see me, aren't you?"

"I don't know, lad—I don't know."

"Luke, I forgive you everything. Will you forgive me anything I said or did that maddened you?"

"Oh, yes," answered the miller, with an odd laugh.

"And you will let my lad Abel marry your girl Ruth?"

Something like an electric shock went through the miller; he raised his bent head as if to speak, but no words came.

"Speak, Luke. I must have your promise before I go."

"You are going then, eh? How long, this time, afore I may look for you again? Twenty years?"

"No; twenty hours, more like. I am waiting, Luke."

"What for?"

"Your consent for the young ones to wed."

"Well, happen I'd better give in, since you've come back from the dead to make me. I'd like to be left alone a bit, I'm thinking."

On his way back, Kneebone stopped a moment at the smithery, and said, with a grave face: "After tea, lad, come up and see me. I want to have a talk with you." Then he went on to the house. What with his words, and his grave manner and countenance, Kneebone must have failed with the miller, thought Abel. This conclusion preyed upon his mind, and filled him with gloomy thoughts. He began to realize what it would cost him to leave Voe and Ruth. Altogether, it was about the most wretched day of his life, and he looked upon it as but the first of a long, long series of similar days. He arrived at Rook's Nest about sundown; he found Kneebone lying in a hammock-chair in the heptagon.

"It is a beautiful evening, and it seems almost a shame to go in. But I think we had better," said Kneebone, getting up and leading the way into the pretty nutshell of a library. "We are all alone in the house; Deborah won't be back for some time, so we can talk freely. I dare say you are anxious to know the upshot of my visit to the mill, eh?" said Kneebone, extracting from a case a superb *puro* carefully sheathed in a manilla wrapper, which he proceeded to uncover with great care; having lighted it, he seemed more at ease.

"Yes, I think I am; though I think I can pretty well guess it," answered Abel, a little gloomily.

"Do you know, lad, that is a bad habit you've got of meeting misery half-way. What's the cause of it, think you?"

"That is more than I can tell. Unless it is that I fancy it's just as well to give yourself up to the inevitable right away, without waiting for it to arrest you."

"And you make up your mind that the inevitable must be painful. Why shouldn't it just as well be pleasurable?"

"I have often asked that question myself, sir."

"And what answer did you get?"

"Simply that it is not pleasurable. This kind of question, sir, gets a very curt answer from life," said Abel, with a laugh that meant a great deal.

"You are not happy, lad. You are a philosopher. Happen it is cause and effect. If I were you, I would take my philosophy and my misery, and throw them, like physic, to the dogs. Not that the dogs will take them; they have too much sense. A hard job to do it, you think. Well, I think I can give you a good heft. The miller, to begin with, is going to drop this Chalk affair."

"No!"

"Yes."

"And there's no talk of me leaving here?"

"No; that ghost is quite laid."

"Thank goodness for that!" exclaimed Abel, as a weary load seemed to fall from him.

"So much for the inevitable, you see. Now I have got a fine piece of news for you. Ha, me! if I were only young like you, and somebody would come round and whisper in my ear—'Her papa withdraws all opposition, and you are free to marry the lady you love!' Wouldn't I send a ringing three times three and a tiger to the stars! You bet."

"You don't mean it? You are mocking me," cried Abel, *in höchster Spannung*, as a German would say.

"Nay, nay; it is fickle Dame Fortune who is mocking thee and thy gloom-shot philosophy. I tell thee, boy, the girl is thine, and with her father's consent, too."

Up from his seat sprang Abel, and seizing his cap, waved it above his head, and shouting: "Hip, hip, hip, hurrah!" sent it flying three times up to the ceiling. "Rah! Rah! Rah!" yelled Kneebone in response. It was an odd scene. A looker-on would not have been surprised to learn that it was an act of exorcism—and it was: from that hour, the spirit of melancholy forsook Abel.

Said Abel, after they had looked at each other in silence and laughed together in sympathy:

"And it is all your doing. My friend, words fail me now!"

Kneebone was on his feet in a moment; as their hands met he said:

"Lad, I've something else to tell you now. Look at me—Abel—I *am your father!*"

"What? What? My father?"

"Yes, lad, yes. And the miller knows it. O lad, shan't we both be able to bite our thumbs at unhappiness now!"

"O father, father, I have been waiting so long for you! Let me cry it out, or it will kill me," cried Abel, and he bent his head upon his father's shoulder, and sobbed for joy.

EPILOGUE.

THE winter was over and gone, and the time of the singing of birds, and the building of nests, and the opening of buds had come. The Memorial Hall was nearly finished, and the Voese were proud of it, for more reasons than one. It had come to represent in their eyes not only the great spate and the great rescue, but also the strange return of the wanderer, "owd Abel Boden." The romance of the thing was still sweet in their mouths. And to think that he had been in their midst seven whole months, and not one of them, the oldest and the wisest, had guessed who he was; though, to be sure, twenty years is a long time, long enough to draw a veil over the eyes even of love itself.

Would it ever be forgotten in Voe, what a day it was when the rumor first went round that old Abel Boden was somewhere in the neighborhood? It was in the fall of the year, and they met together, some on the Scarthin bridge, and the rest in the Nag's Head, and they talked the matter over till the stars came out. Next day it was given out there was to be a meeting held under the forge elm; and after tea everybody that could walk or hobble was there. Presently down the hill came old Nathan Wass and Christopher Kneebone; and everybody seemed a bit disappointed, for they had got the notion into their heads that old Abel himself would turn up that night. Nathan Wass stood on a stone bench, with Kneebone beside him; and saying he wanted to say something, the crowd ceased its chatter and gave heed.

"Friends," said Nathan, and his voice shook, though not with age—"friends, I hanna got the gift o' th' gab, and it isna in me to entertain you wi' a fine speech. I'm on'y come here to introduce to you a dear, dear owd friend o' mine, and o' thine, too; for Voe ne'er puts out o' mind the memory o' her childer, though they be afar off in foreign lands where she canna see 'em. Friends, here he is—this is owd Abel Boden!" So saying, he put his hand on Kneebone's shoulder.

The crowd did nothing but open mouth and eyes in stupid amazement; it was dead silent. And it kept silence for a long time, while Kneebone was speaking—in fact, until he referred

to his going away, when he said that, although he could not prove he was innocent of the charge brought against him without showing that somebody else was in the wrong—and that he did not mean to do under any circumstances—yet he was sure they would all believe him when he said that he was innocent of ever attempting the life of any one, though happen he had had to fight for his own life. Then the crowd found its tongue in honest fashion, and Kneebone knew that, as of yore, the heart of Voe was with him. After that, what a talk he made them! What strange tales he told them! How he made them laugh, and cry, and cheer in turns! And when a rheumatic old native cried out: "Hast made much siller, shepherd?" and Kneebone, with a laugh, said: "Ay, old friend, and I have that. I guess I am richer than my old master, the squire himself," the long, loud shout that rent the air was one of honest joy; not a streak of envy was in the whole crowd.

Miller Boden was not at the meeting, for the sufficient reason that he was lying at death's door. Voe might have spared itself much speculation as to how the miller would bear himself toward his brother and his brother's lad; for nobody counted on him dying. But die he did. The strain had been too much for him; he took to his bed the very night that his brother discovered himself to him, and when he left it, five weeks later, he was carried out feet foremost to the grave. During this sad time, Janoca Phythian bound herself to Ruth with cords of loving sympathy, that were never to be broken while life lasted. So that when Janoca and Balthasar insisted upon her making Carbel Chase her home, at least for the present, Ruth consented, and there she was now domiciled. Abel, also, had changed his residence, and was now living with his father; and this, too, represented the work of the Reaper on whose not unkind face we shall each one look in his turn. The weird little tufa cottage on the edge of the wood was now vacant—had been vacant since the last day of the old year, when they gave into the keeping of Mother Earth the mortal remains of Nathan Wass, the venerable old broom-maker.

And now the winter was over and gone, and the time of the singing of birds, and the building of nests, and the opening of buds had come. The Scarthin with its mellow music still went on, "Flow, flow, flow, always the same," as "Old Q." remarked of the Thames; it looked so picturesque, and bright, and full of sparkling good-humor, that it seemed well-nigh incredible that it could ever get its back up in the way it did. Yet a year ago to the very day, thought Abel, as he stood on

the bridge and looked at the shining waters below, what a raging demon it was, and how it struggled to devour him and his darling! Presently he passed on and made his way toward Carbel Chase. They were going to celebrate the day at the Chase with a dinner, to which he and his father were invited. Abel chose the way over the fields, which led him among the rocks, and streams, and dells, and coppices, and meadows, and ploughed lands, ribbed with green furrows of springing corn. The sweet tenderness, the piping gladness of nature, seemed the outcome of the deep, unruffled peace that dwelt in its heart.

And he was a child of nature, and at last, at last!—ah me! it was like a magician's tale—he was going to travel, and see strange lands, and tread mighty primeval forests, and see unheard-of forms of animal and insect life; explore, discover, collect, read, study, and—and—well, why not?—some day, when he had something to tell, write a book that would make the wisest rub his eyes! These were his thoughts, and they held him, so that he passed within a dozen feet of Ruth, who was seated on a rock in a little dell, without seeing her. She allowed him to go on some little distance, and then she sent out a bird-note that brought him to a stand in a moment. He looked round in surprise, and catching sight of her, came back with a bound.

“You looked very happy as you went by,” said Ruth, as soon as her lover gave her a chance of speaking.

“I felt as I looked.”

“Indeed! Yet you were not thinking of me, sir.”

“I am afraid, to be truthful, I was not, just then.”

“I admire your candor, sir, but your sentiments are not complimentary. It seems that I am not necessary to your happiness.” This with great dignity, and an air of wounded pride.

“Nay, sweetheart, that isn't true. Isn't it good health that enables a man to enjoy the prospect of a capital dinner? Yet, thinking of the dinner, he need give no one thought at the time to his health. Without you I should not be capable of happiness. But since I know I have you, most things make me happy.”

“But you haven't got me yet.”

“No; but, darling, won't you tell me when I shall have you, in your sense?”

“In my sense? I have no sense, sir!” She blushed divinely, and broke out laughing. Then, with sudden gravity: “You must know, Mr. Boden, that it is not every one who could afford to say they were without sense. People might be only too ready to believe them.” But Abel was not to be diverted.

"Come, my love, tell me," he murmured, drawing her close to him, "when shall it be? Why should we wait any longer? Shall it be in a month?" Ruth shook her head. "In two months, then? I can't wait a day longer. Shall it be two months from to-day, love?" He felt a little tremor pass over her. She raised her head, looked in his eyes for one moment, and then threw her arms round his neck and whispered:

"Yes, dearest, two months from to-day I will be yours forever and ever and ever."

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When they reached the Chase they found Kneebone—who had started from home early in the morning, saying that he was going to Yewdle Brig—had already arrived, and, as it was still early in the afternoon, had proposed a stroll. Janoca was for staying at home, pleading household duties; but this idea met with general disapprobation, and she gave way. It was Ruth's suggestion that they should go as far as Carkloe Manor and back; and as neither she nor Abel had been over the place, and a prettier walk could not be found, this was agreed to. When they got there, they found no signs of workmen about, and smoke was issuing from a score of chimneys.

"It looks as if somebody was living here. I fear we shall not be able to get in," observed Janoca.

"I am so sorry! It looks such a dear old place," remarked Ruth.

"Anyway, we can inquire," said Kneebone, marching up to the great doors, and pulling a bell that rang in the court-yard. Part of the great door opened and revealed the face of the bailiff's daughter.

"We want to have a look at the manor. I suppose there is no objection?" said Kneebone.

The girl shook her head, saying: "We have orders not to admit the public, without written permission. You see, sir, the place is now finished and furnished, and we expect the owner will soon be here."

"Dear me! that is awkward. From whom can we get a written permit?"

"From the steward, Mr. Dimsdale, at Yewdle Brig."

"Then, my dear Ruth, we must wait until it is occupied, and pay the owner a visit. There is sure to be a lady in the family," said Janoca. She had stood aside, so that the girl within the court-yard had not caught sight of her. But now, hearing her voice, the girl looked out, and said:

"Oh, I beg pardon; I didn't know Miss Phythian was one

of the party. We have orders to admit Miss Phythian and her friends at any time."

"What a delightful man he must be! And I do not even know the gentleman by name," laughed Janoca. They went in, and under the guidance of the bailiff's daughter the whole party started to go over the place. But in accordance, doubtless, with some peculiar law of nature, it soon came to pass that Balthasar and the guide were one room ahead of Abel and Ruth, who in turn were a room ahead of Kneebone and Janoca; and nothing seemed able to disturb the relative position of these various interesting bodies of humanity.

There had been wrought a magical change in the appearance of the interior since last we saw it; the place had been exquisitely finished and upholstered, and looked enchanting. Janoca was in raptures. When they came to the long drawing-room, she exclaimed:

"Oh, isn't this a perfect picture! I never saw a more lovely room in my life. And look, look there, Mr. Kneebone." She pointed to the end of the room, and there, overlooking the park, just where she had designated, was a noble window, the upper half being of rich stained glass of genuine antiquity and very costly.

"Yes, I see. Singular you should both have hit upon the same idea," said Kneebone, with a laugh.

"But do you not think it is a great improvement?"

"Oh, decidedly."

"You unappreciative individual!"

In due time they came to the ball-room. The book-cases had vanished. The panels were enriched with exquisite Watteau designs. The room was finished in white and gold, but the ceiling was—*bare*. For some moments Janoca was lost in astonishment. What was the meaning of the thing? Everything had been done as she had suggested; even the ceiling had been left bare, as if to mark her words to Kneebone: "I will think about that, and let you know." And oddly enough, the subject had never been mentioned since. One would almost think—what a start she gave, as the idea flashed suddenly upon her! She turned and looked Kneebone keenly in the face for some seconds, without a word. Then she said slowly: "Is it possible?" Thereupon Kneebone pulled out a toothpick and—put it back again into his pocket. Which was a fine instance of presence of mind!

"It is written, All things are possible," he answered.

"And you have bought Carkloe Manor?"

"I have bought Carkloe Manor. And the few alterations

you suggested, I have done my best to have carried out; even the ceiling awaits your pleasure."

"And I never once dreamed of such a thing! Oh, I am so glad! Glad for your own sake, and dear Ruth's, and—and for my own too. It will be so nice to have you living here. Oh, it is all just like a romance, only that it is beautifully real. Do let me congratulate you, sincerely."

"Do you really like it so much, then?"

"I think it is just enchanting. I always thought the dear old place was a poem in stone, and now it seems as if it had been set to music."

"Ha! that is just what's lacking. Miss Phythian—Janoca—will you come and set it to music?" Here he took her hand, and added: "I bought the place for you, and you only. I dare not speak before—not since the day we were here last. But I must speak now. You have got into my life in a way I thought no one ever could again. If love and devotion can make you happy, your life shall be a happy one. Will you let me hope?"

"O Mr. Kneebone, I didn't expect this! What am I to say? I am——"

"Say Abel, instead of Mr. Kneebone or Mr. Boden."

"Well—Abel—there now!"

"Oh, God bless you for that! It won't be long ere you say, Abel, dear, I love you! Will it?" He drew her to him; and the stately Janoca yielded—oh, so sweetly! oh, so divinely! oh, so womanly! When their lips parted she whispered softly: "Abel, dearest, I love you! I love you! and I am so happy!"

.

A little later the party met in the drawing-room, and at a word from Kneebone the guide left them alone. And then and there Kneebone told them of his ownership of the place. Balthasar sneezed, Abel laughed, Ruth sighed, all of them being wonder-struck. Said Kneebone, when the sensation had somewhat evaporated:

"But the best news comes last. Abel, lad, this lady is going to be my wife." Then Ruth gave a little cry of delight, and a clap of her hands, and ran and threw her arms round Janoca, and actually began to weep.

"Oh, I am so glad, so glad! I will try to be the sweetest daughter to you in the world."

"Thank' you, darling girl. Like you, I am so glad, so glad!" murmured Janoca, as she took her in her arms and kissed her.

"And so that scamp Philip will be dished, after all, and I

shall not have to do the dishing. I am free from all danger of the fowler's net evermore. Kneebone, I condole with you. Jano, O Jano, may you be as happy as you are good!" quoth Balthasar, going up to his sister and kissing her.

"O uncle, I do love you for loving her, and making her love you! Isn't she an angel?" said Ruth, in his ear, as he embraced her.

"Yes, lassie, that and more too. And what about you and Abel? Haven't you kept him waiting long enough, think you?"

"I have promised to marry him two months from to-day," she answered low.

"You have? Then for being a good girl, I tell you what I will give you as a wedding present. A steam yacht! Nay, nay, don't smother me. You shall have one all your own, and sail away with your husband to South America."

Murmured Ruth: "Would it not be nice if you and Abel were married on the same day?"

"Well, lassie, if you will help me, maybe we shall be able to work it."

And together they worked it.

THE END.

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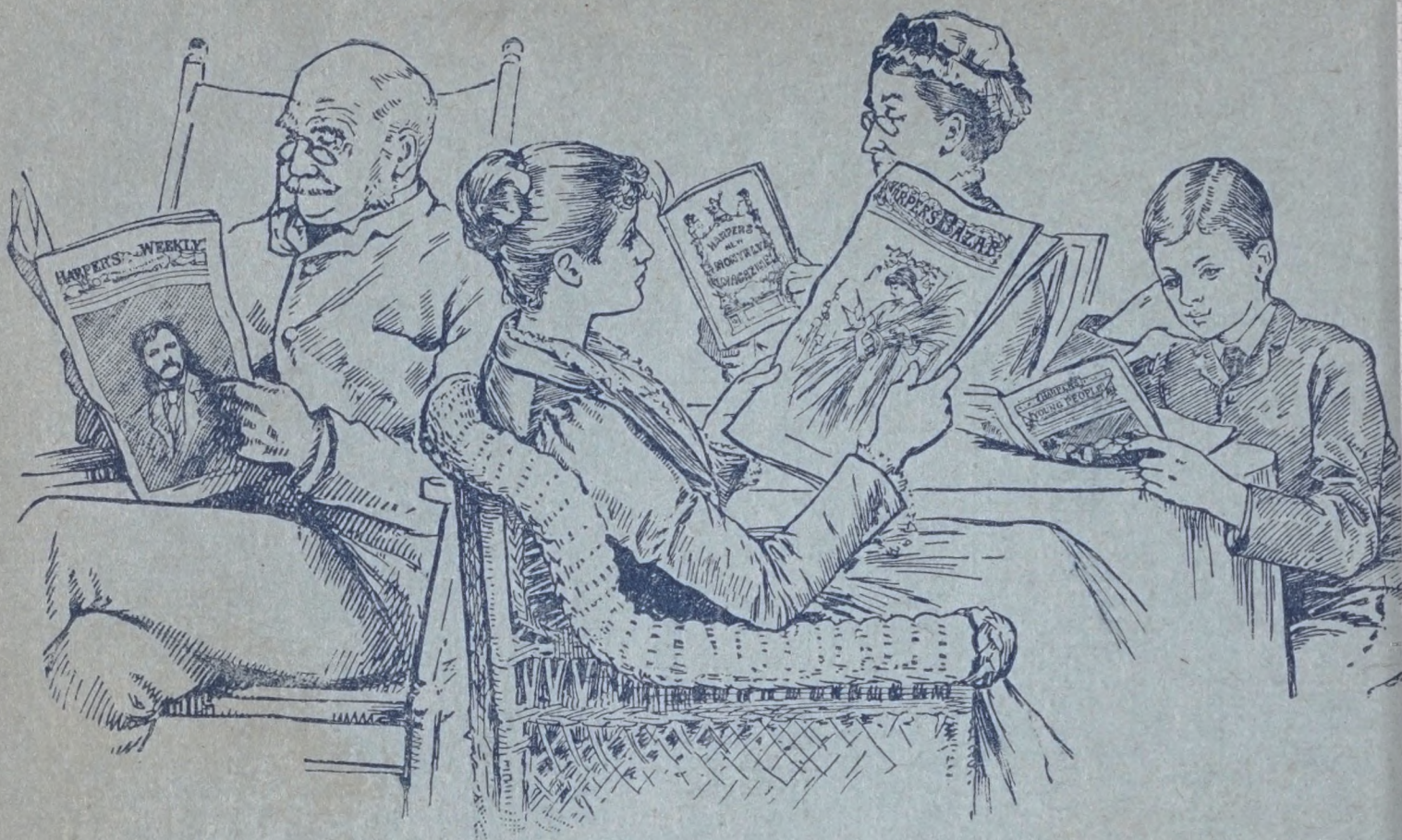
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